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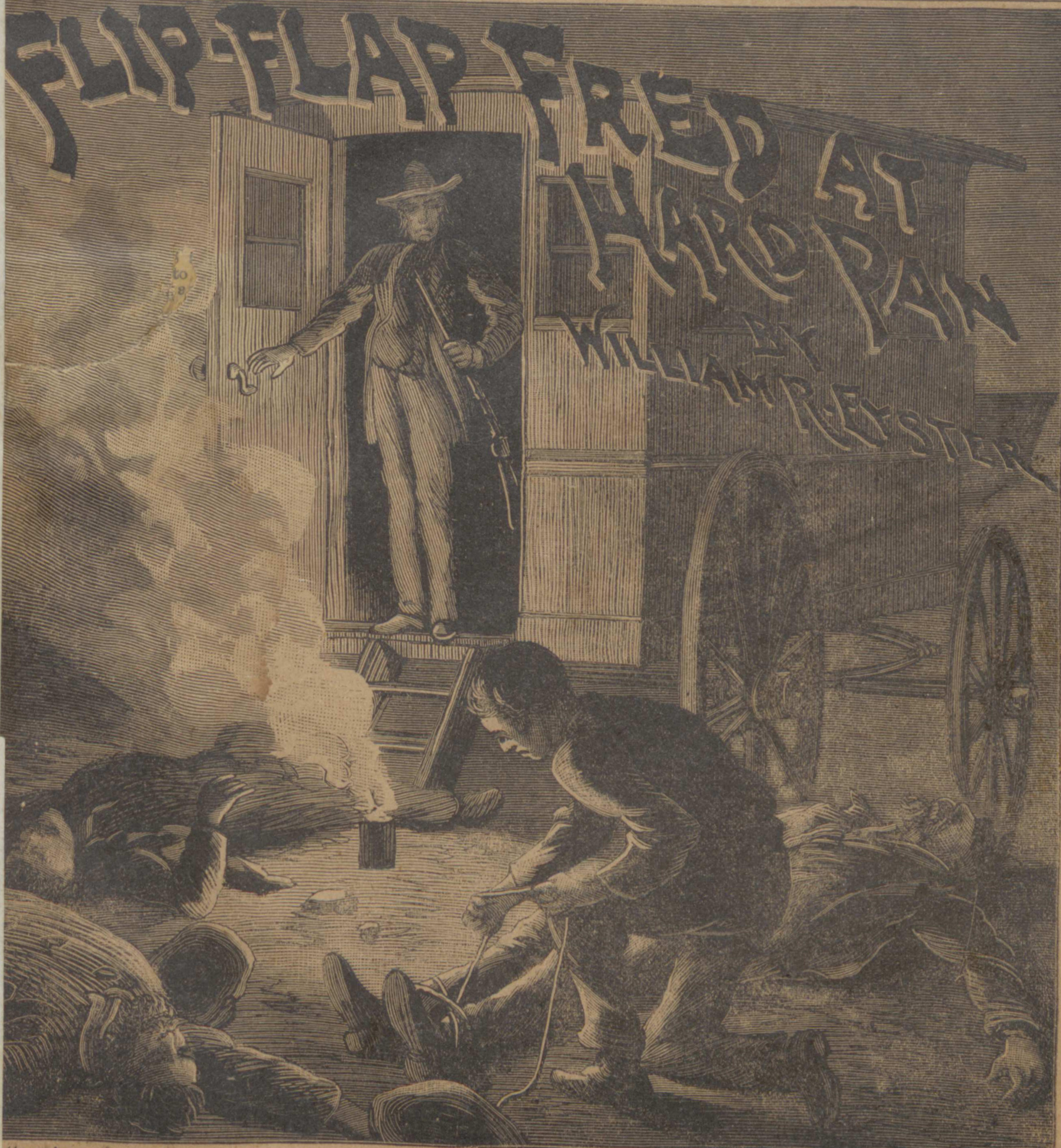
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"TIE 'EM HAND AN' FOOT, FLIP-FLAP!" AND THE QUEER SHOWMAN GRINNED HIS DELIGHT AT HIS ELECTRIC KNOCK-OUT.

Flip-Flap Fred AT HARD PAN;

OR,

The Stroller Showman's Shake-Up.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "DANDY DARKE," "FARO FRANK,"
"HARRY WINKLE'S LONG CHASE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE WONDERFUL WHEEL.

"TIP us a case, mister, an' I'll bring yer luck. I'm Little Limberleg, ther boy with ther glass nose. Mammy's dead, an' daddy's dead, an' ez fur me—look at me! I speak fur myself. I war blowed up in ther big 'xplosion, an' that leg's bin so ever sence. I can't work; I don't keer ter play, an' all 'round it's a thunderin' bad fix fur a boy ov my size. W'ot yer goin' ter do 'bout it?"

The benevolent-looking stranger, with the long, flaxen locks, and the pale-blue eyes, regarded the boy with a mildly curious gaze, while Little Limberleg swung his right leg backward and forward and around in a bewildering sort of way, that suggested that it was either without a bone, or was a fraud altogether.

With a leg like that it seemed a happy miracle that the boy could crawl, let alone walk, otherwise he was better-looking than the average, having an intelligent face, clear, ferret-like eyes, and a sturdy form.

"Jewhillikins! Ef that's a nat'r'al leg, an' kin be put to ary use, it's a wonder an' no mistake. Kin' yew walk on it? Ef yew kin ther's a fortin' in it, an' no mistake—sure ez my name air Amariah Azariah Holdfast. Why, ther's men by ther cord ez would give a dollar tew see that leg. I'll give two—ef yew take it off."

"Yer thinks ther j'nts on screws, does yer; an' ther hull thing a fraud? Ye'r' mistooked, stranger. It's jest ther natur' ov ther b'aste. Ef it's charity yer bin a-thinkin' ov don't wait no longer. Bin three weeks to a day sence I hed a squar' meal, an' two sence I tasted water. It's coin I'm afther, an' not good advice."

Azariah Holdfast was a likely-looking object for an appeal of this kind to reach.

He was tenderfoot all over—tall, gaunt and ungainly in build, and with the unmistakable look of a man whose proper place was in the rural districts. It seemed as though, if he had any business in Hard Pan, it was peculiarly unfortunate. That camp was of the kind that swallows such men at a mouthful.

Limberleg was pretty certain that he saw the hand of the stranger go into a pocket, and come out not altogether empty. He held up his hands and Azariah cast a coin.

But, even as sharp a boy as Limberleg will sometimes slip up on a sure thing. He saw the coin—it was a great, big, old-fashioned dollar of our daddies. He saw the motion of Holdfast's hand; saw the dollar leave it and come spinning toward him; and he made a grab accordingly.

The trouble was that when his fingers closed the dollar was not there! It spun past his hands; he heard behind him a low, silvery laugh, and turning, saw a girl with a coin in her hand. Azariah had pitched it with a double curve, and never having had a chance for practice on the twist, Limberleg did not "get onto him" at the first trial.

But, the girl troubled him more than the loss of the coin. He had hitherto seen no girl, and had not suspected her presence. Who was she, and what was she doing in the company of Azariah Amariah Holdfast?

She gazed at the boy; smiled; nodded; and then threw the dollar down at his feet.

"There, Little Limberleg, if you need it you may have it. Father did not mean to make you feel badly, or angry, but it is a way he has. When you know him better you will laugh too."

The boy scratched his head, looked at the coin, and at the two—first at the girl, and then at Amariah.

"A kitten she be, Amariah, full of fun, an' velvet on her paws. Mebbe there's claws, too? Does she bite?" and without waiting for an answer, he bent over backward, slowly and with perfect balance, until the top of his head touched his heels, and his body and legs formed a perfect imitation of a round "O."

Down went his hands, up went his heels, and

upside down he marched on his hands toward Holdfast, holding the dollar in his mouth. When he was within a yard he came right side up with a thump, and extended the coin.

"Take her back, mister, take her back! I don't d'serve it. A boy ez kin be fooled that easy o'rt ter be starved, an' that's a fact. An', Azariah, I'm hungry, an' that's a gospel; but I ain't jest so shoal on ther bar that I can't whack up ther price on a squar' meal at a secoad-class hash-house when I git ter Hard Pan. That what I tolle yer war all bizziness; this here be suthin' else. See?"

He drew a handful of coin out of his pocket, shook them in his two closed hands until they clinked together noisily, and then sent them rattling back to their place.

Azariah had calmly taken his dollar again, and was watching and listening. He did not seem surprised at the display of capital made by Limberleg; nor did he when the boy began to revolve with a succession of back handsprings, that increased in rapidity until he seemed to go around the patch of level turf like a turning-wheel. Twice, or almost twice, he made the circuit; and then suddenly stopped in front of the girl.

"How's that, little one? Fur a poor offling, can't I sling on style? W'ot I war tellin' ther old man war all guff. I'm Fairy Fred, ther boss boy ov North Ameriky, an' I'm goin' inter Hard Pan ter make a fortun'. Now, who be you?"

The girl looked inquiringly at Amariah, who nodded. Meantime the boy went on:

"I cottoned to yer at fu'st sight. Those laughs ov yourn—silver bells ain't nowhar! An' them eyes! 'Lectric batt'ries nowhar, neither. I'm all gone, right off ther han'le. Put it thar, pretty pard, an' 'sider me yer solid fr'en' till death. W'ot did yer say I'll call yer? I'd orter know, 'cos you an' me's like ter run in one ring—fur a while, anyhow."

The girl was still smiling as she answered:

"You talk too much. No one can get a word in edgeways. I am no pard of yours, and I do not know that you are my friend; but, I like you. I shall tell you who I am because father says I may; but, don't be foolish. He may take a notion *not* to like you, and that is always bad for little orphans. Suppose he blew bad luck at you—you would lose your money, you would be hungrier than ever, and you couldn't turn any more wheels, or anything. Oh, father Holdfast can be a terrible man when he wants to!"

"W'o's ther chatterbox now?" Ov all heaps ov talk 'thout sayin' nothin' this takes ther cake! Maybe you noticed that I war slightly irregular in my opticks—w'ich makes me a trifle hard ov hearin'. Say it a leetle slower this time; an' not much more ov anything else. Me mind's kind ov weak an' wanderin', I reckon; dunno ez I kin take in more at a time."

"Funny Fanny!" and she looked at him gravely as a judge while she pronounced the two words.

The boy gave a quick glance over his shoulder at the spot where Azariah had been standing, but the man was gone! and Fairy Fred—or Little Limberleg, as he had first called himself—was alone in the dingle with the young girl.

"Honest Injun, be that yer reg'lar, go-ter-dinner name an' han'le?"

"Honest Injun."

"That's funny, Fanny! Our names be purty much ov a muchness, an' a good bit alike. I hev a strawberry mark on me arm—hev you? Might be my long lost sister, don'cher know."

"No, Little Limberleg, I have no such mark on my arm, and you are not my brother. Don't be foolish. What are you going to do at Hard Pan?"

"Goin' ter turn wheels an' flip-flops, an' make my everlastin' fortun'. When I git in ther fine touches I jest throw 'em all cold; I parellize 'em, I break 'em all up, an' snatch 'em bald-headed. But I say, Fan! don't it strike you ez a great pity that ye'r' otherwise begaged? Ef I hed a likely-lookin' leetle gal like you ter pass round ther hat wile I war trottin' 'bout, heels up, I'd rake in a heap more ov ther dust. You couldn't be indoosed?"

"No, Freddy, I think not. I have enough to do without that. You have never tried Hard Pan. I am not sure that the partnership would pay. They may not care for your wheels and flip-flops. Then what is to become of you? The town is a wicked one. It gobbles up young children like you as though they were early onions. I prefer Azariah. Perhaps, if you were to ask him, he would take you in charge. Then we could be together, and see more of each other. Shall I speak to him about it?"

"Don't 'know 'bout that. Mebbe Amariah

may make a fortin', but whar, oh, whar would I kin in at? W'ot mought he be doin' tha'? Now I see him, an' now I don't see him. Thar's a myst'ry 'bout him, an' I ain't so sure it wouldn't pay ter foller it up. You cert' that yer wasn't dragged off frum yer home in childhood's happy hours; an' that ther ain't no rich parient ready ter stack up a big pile ov duckats fur me a-bringin' yer in? You ain't no kith ner kin ter Holdfast, that I'll swear to."

"Don't swear, little boy, or the fish won't bite."

"Little boy, nothin'! I'm bigger an' older ner you be; an' ther fish w'ot I wants 'll come soon ernuf. Don't come peekin'an' peerin' inter yer Uncle Ezra's affairs."

"I think you are as anxious as I to peek and peer. But we don't mind it one bit. Stay with us to-night, and look us all over. Azariah will give you a bed under the wagon, and in the morning we will all go into the town together. You shall have some supper, too, if you are a good boy. I think that father Holdfast has gone to start the fire now."

"Then you ain't trav'lin' afoot-back! Good! I war thinkin' ov makin' a camp meself, an' don't mind j'inin' forces. You kin furnish ther grub, I'll stake up appetite, an' we'll sheer an' sheer alike. 'Bout whar may that camp be?"

"Come and we will see. It seems to me that I can smell the smoke already. Can't you?"

"I smell fresh meat, an' I reckon he's a-cookin' ov it. Lead on, me noble nibsess. I wouldn't d'zert yer—for less ner a dollar."

At the further end of the dingle some huge trees concealed the bend in the banks of the shallow ravine beyond. Still further on there was a small, natural amphitheater, where the fire was built, over which was toasting the fresh meat whose presence the boy had so promptly discovered.

Fred's eyes were as quick as his nose. As he came in sight of the fire, with Azariah bending over it, he gave a start. He had discovered the presence of some one else, and he caught Fanny by the arm as he whispered sharply into her ear.

"Say nothin' ter nobody! Ther's some one else there, an' I war a peek at him afore this thing goes fur'der."

"All right, little Limberleg; but I did not think you were such a coward."

"Coward goes tell I kin find out su'thin' better. But ef that's ther kind ov frien's Amariah hez I dunno ez I want ter j'ine his combination. Ah, he's snookin' 'round this way. Good-mornin'!" and without waiting for answer he slid off into the bushes, in spite of the warning whisper—almost a cry—that Fanny sent after him.

Nevertheless, he heard it—and understood it when he heard a deep growl, and saw an immense bear slowly rise up, until it stood erect and facing him.

CHAPTER II.

A BOY FOR THE BUSINESS.

BEARS have a certain unreliability about their tender mercies that makes them objects of interest to the boy of moderate bigness. Something of the same kind has been observed concerning the nature of the boys, but that does not count for much with the bears.

Fairy Fred was not overwhelmed. The bear had evidently been routed from a snooze, and if it had been untamable, or very fierce, it would doubtless have interviewed Amariah before this. Naturally enough, the boy, being in the habit of thinking rapidly, decided at once that this was Amariah's property.

But, how was Holdfast's chattel going to take this intrusion? There was some risk.

Fred never winced.

"Easy by jerks, old fellow!" he whispered.

"Ef I could 'ford it I'd run-hard. But, jest now I ain't runnin', an' ef ther's ary ser'us diff'rens ov 'pinyun I'd jest ez soon talk it over some other time. Stiddy, ez yer be!"

Nevertheless, the bear advanced. He was in no very good humor, and to Fred he looked as though he had an eye to business. It was something of a relief when he saw Fanny glide past him and fearlessly lay her hand on the head of the animal.

"Down, Dandy, down!" she said in a whisper; and without a second's hesitation Dandy sunk to the ground.

"Lie still there, old fellow, until you get it into your woolly pate that this is a friend who is to be treated with respect."

The bear gave a little sniff of regret, as if to say that the friend might nevertheless be very good eating. Then he was silent, while Fanny

took the boy by the hand and quietly led him away.

As they left Bruin and the camp-fire behind, Fred did not object.

After awhile Fanny halted.

"What do you know about Nestor Northrup?" she asked, looking keenly at the boy as she spoke.

"Don't know nothin' 'bout him; but I war mighty much afeared that he might know somethin' 'bout me! He's a snooper frum 'way back, an' a bad man on wheels, ef these opticks ov mine be wu'th much. W'ot's he doin' here?"

He has business with father, and will hardly notice a boy like you. If you wish to keep out of his sight remain here a while. He will not stay long, and when he is gone I will come and let you know."

"That's ther preact size ov it, ef he kin tear hisself away frum sich fascinating s'ciety ez yourn in a reasonable time. An' fur Dandy—keep him whar he won't git hurt. I'm offul tender-hearted, but I can't bide a bear."

Fanny laughed—it seemed as though she was always laughing—nodded—and went away.

Then Fred, after carefully looking around, went away also. He crept. He crawled. He glided. Noiselessly and by slow degrees he wormed his way toward the fire, and the two men that were talking together. His curiosity got the better of his fears—if he had any—and he acted as though he was willing to run a few risks to gain a little information.

The conversation was in a low tone, and yet loud enough for the listener to hear the most of it, after he got into position.

The visitor, whom he had recognized as Nestor Northrup, was speaking.

"That sort of talk is played out, my friend. You may as well confess. You followed me here. If I had not friends who keep me posted on all that is going on, you would have kept mighty quiet until the time came for you to strike. If I find you within twenty miles of Hard Pan by this time to-morrow night, you will turn your toes up to the daisies. I never say what I don't mean; and I am saying all of this."

"I want tew know!" answered Amariah, quite coldly. "Yew have bin sayin' a lot ov stuff, more or less Latin an' Greek. I don't know ary such man ez yew menshun; an' ez fur yew, I never see yew afore. Ef yew fool round ther bizziness end ov a ho'net, yew'll be apt tew find out how sharp-set he kin be when he's in right-down airnest."

"Pooh, Cyrus Dawling! You were a coward then, and you are a coward now! I am not afraid unless you shoot at my back; but I have no time to watch you. The easiest plan is to give you fair warning. Then, if you don't get—down you go!"

"An' what will I be doin'? This air a free country, an' I reckon I'll stay. Now, ef yew hev ary occasion, yew kin set up, an' hev some supper. Ef yew ain't, I'd jest ez soon yew skipped my camp, unless yew got suthin' more important than all that."

"Nothing more important—for you. There may be some other things that I might mention, but for a man that seems as dead bent on sudden death as you do, I do not think it is worth while to speak of them. If I have not said enough to warn you—beware!"

Amariah looked coolly after the retreating figure until it faded from sight in the evening gloom. Then he busied himself with his pots and kettles, as if he thought there was no hereafter—or none, at least, in connection with his late visitor.

There was a person who thought he had not heard all that could be heard; that person was Little Limberleg. He kept very quiet until Nestor Northrup had passed his hiding-place, and then followed silently. It was not hard to do; and he had his reward. By and by Northrup halted and gave a low whistle, which was answered by the same kind of a sound, and he was joined by a man who had evidently been in waiting.

It was risky, but the boy crept nearer, until Northrup could almost have touched him with an ordinary cane, if one had been in his hand.

By that time the first burst of confidence was over, but there were still pickings enough to pay Fred for his trouble. The first thing he heard was:

"Yes, dead sure. I gave him fair warning, too. For the sake of the girl he may take it. If he was alone I would gamble on it that he would make a straight plunge into Hard Pan."

"And make things mighty lively for the boys, if he is as brisk as they say. You saw the girl, did you? No mistake there?"

"Not a sign of one. We will have her, to-night. She is worth her weight in gold. But if we take her we will have to kill him; so just j'ot those two points down, and add them together."

"It strikes me you made a mistake in threatening him, though. All the good of that was to put him on his guard."

"Fudge! If I told him he must look out for me to-morrow he'll close his eyes to-night. See that you have your lambs ready for the frolic."

They separated without discovering the presence of the boy, and departed in different directions. After he was certain that they were out of hearing Fred arose, and made his way back to the spot where Fanny had left him. He was afraid that she had come for him in his absence, and was trying, as he went along, to frame an answer that would suit her questioning in such a contingency.

He found, however, that the girl was talking in a low tone with Azariah, and so interesting was their conversation that the two had forgotten their supper. What more likely than that they had forgotten him?

He coughed slightly, as a means of attracting their attention, and saw the girl turn toward him with a start. She said something to Holdfast, and then came gliding back.

"You must forgive me for not keeping my promise sooner, but the time passed faster than I knew. Come. I am afraid that you are almost starved. You should not have waited after you saw that the man was gone."

"Reckon that's what Dandy thought. He war kind ov encouragin' me, but I 'magined I might introd. I mou't be hungrier, but then I'd be a-starvin'."

He spoke as though he meant it, but his remark hardly drew the sympathy that one would have thought the occasion deserved. Fanny actually looked at him with suspicion; but led the way to the improvised feast. Fred followed his conductor, and took a seat at what he could but confess was a much more bountiful board than he had expected to see.

The supper was a matter of business with the boy, and he wasted no time in remarks. When he had finished he was full, and for a little time thereafter was silent, sitting by the side of the fire while his entertainers put away the fragments of the feast, and the articles of table use.

After a time Azariah came and sat down beside him, and produced a pipe. He was thoughtful, and not inclined to talk. As for Fanny—she had retired to the wagon.

The wagon was canvas-covered, and was lighted by a lantern that swung from its roof. The boy had not a chance to see inside, since the curtains were down; but the vehicle had a comfortable and at the same time a Gypsyish look, that made it very attractive to his young eyes.

"Yew don't smoke?" queried Holdfast, after a long silence.

"Nary smoke! Ain't old ernuf ter use it ter advantage, an' bin kinder savin' it up fur a new sensation when ther vanities ov life be otherwise purty nigh played out. I'll begin ter smoke when my beard's grown, an' ther nat'r'l looshuns ov youth ain't ez strong ez they be at present. Nothin' like keepin' a leetle capital ter fall back on."

Amariah looked him over again, with new interest. The little touch of philosophy was a revelation—if it was founded on fact.

"If yew keep in with Amariah a while, mebbe yew will never learn, an' then yew will miss one good thing in life. Better begin now."

"Think I'll be cut off in ther bloom ov my youth, eh? Don't reckon so. Bin through everythin' thet kin phaze a boy ov my bigness—fire, bulletts, water an' all—an' here I am yit. Ther's nothin' fur me ter try but old age; an' that's a long way off. At least, I'm a-gamblin' on it. Ef you're willin', I'm agreeable; an' we'll make a boss team, an' no mistake."

"I'm not denyin' thet I hev some idear ov takin' yew in tow. I might find use fur a boy ov yewr style, ef I war sure thet I could trust him. An' ef, after tryin' him, I found I couldn't, it would be mighty bad fur that boy. Yew think thet you sabbe?"

"Mister Holdfast, I cottoned to you an' Fan ther minnit I see'd yer. I got ez much nerve ez ther next boy, an' I don't talk fur a cent. Try me; ef I don't pan out ter suit, why, I'm Little Limberleg, ag'in, an' you kin paddle yer own canoe."

"I hev give yew warnin', an' ef yew live threw tew-night, an' suit, we'll go tergether in ther mornin'."

"Good chance ter hev our throats cut, hev we? I ain't afeard! I hev a weepin', an' kin

take keer ov me an' Fan, ef you kin look out fur yerself. Signs do look ez though ther' was goin' ter be blood on ther moon."

The boy took a revolver out of his bundle, thoughtfully raised the hammer, and made the cylinder revolve until he was sure that every barrel was in working order. Then he thrust it into a receptacle that was under his jacket, and looked up inquiringly at Amariah.

"Yew may understand thet ther's danger; but yew may not know thet ef it comes yew must dance ez Azariah whistles."

"Ef you're ther boss you kin spread ther layout ter suit yerself. What do yer think are goin' ter be ther trouble? Ary thing in ther natur' ov a gang?"

"Yes; a gang thet will be 'round tew-night to take Fanny an' kill Amariah. Ef they find any small boys lookin' on, they will be goin' fur them, too."

"That's the kind I like ter see. Hev a chance ter keep yer hand in, an' all corpusses paid fur. I'm here, Azariah, an' ef they kin stand it I kin. Bring on ther gang."

CHAPTER III.

EBENEZER CROWFUT HAS STRANGE VISITORS.

HARD PAN was brisk and populous. As a mining center it was catching all the floating population that was unattached, and that by hook or crook could get there. There were solid citizens, who had come to stay; and there were others who only wanted to skim the cream off of the pickings, and then go on. There were miners and mines; gambling-houses and gamblers; roughs and rough places; all in addition to the people and places that made up the solid part of the town.

Ebenezer Crowfut came early. He brought a little capital, which he had embarked purely in a mercantile venture. He had prospered beyond his expectations, and when this story opens he was one of the responsible business men of the place, who was generally respected as an honest man, and a prosperous one. The rougher portion of the community let him alone altogether, and the balance delighted to do him honor. When he first settled in Hard Pan some one dubbed him "Old Slow and Sure," and he was sometimes called that name yet.

The day this story opens he was sitting on the stool that was behind his desk in the little cubby-hole that had been partitioned off at the rear of the store, and which was known as the office. A knock on the side of the partition, near the door, caused him to look up from the books that had been claiming his attention.

"Come in!" he called, and the door opened. As he heard no step he naturally looked up over the desk.

In spite of himself, and his usual serenity of nerve, he gave a little start of surprise at what he saw.

Standing on the threshold was a lady, dressed as he had not seen a feminine dressed for years; and holding by the hand a girl.

They stood in silence, looking timidly into the room, and Mr. Crowfut's invitation to enter seemed to have startled them. The elder looked down at the younger, and the child answered by a reassuring pressure of the hand. Then they advanced a step or two, and were standing in the middle of the office, the door of which the child closed behind them.

Over the top of the desk, Mr. Crowfut and the lady looked at each other, until the gentleman broke the silence.

"Sorry madame that I cannot offer you a seat. Is there any way in which I can serve you?"

"I hardly know how to approach you, since it is with what must seem to you a curious request. I have heard you spoken of, Mr. Crowfut, as a man of honor, as well as of charity. I desire to—"

The sound of hasty footsteps behind her interrupted the lady. She ceased speaking, and looked back over her shoulder, just as the door opened, and a singular looking man appeared, his eyes fixed full on hers.

Without a word the lady threw up her hands, and in what seemed a dead faint fell to the floor.

"Dear me!" cried Mr. Crowfut, addressing the man, rising as he spoke, and starting to come around the desk; "what does this mean? Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"This means, sir," answered the man with the queer eyes, "that you were almost the prey of the wildest, most designing adventuress that ever lived. If she had ever told you her story, and she has a different one for every place, you would have been lost."

Flip-Flap Fred at Hard Pan.

"But, sir, she did not tell me her story, although she had my permission to do so. You interrupted her before I had a chance to judge for myself. By what right did you do that? I must say that this intrusion is unwarrantable on your part. What have you to say for yourself?"

And while Ebenezer Crowfut was speaking he was also gathering the lady up from the floor.

She did not seem to be senseless, but rather as though some violent shock had deprived her of all physical strength.

One thing was remarkable: the child appeared neither alarmed at the appearance of the man nor at the sudden faintness of her elder companion, who, from the resemblance of the two faces, Crowfut suspected of being her mother.

Ebenezer was conscious, also, of a strange thrill passing through his frame as he lifted the lady from the floor and placed her on the stool which he had lately occupied. That was not the kind of a resting-place he would have chosen for her, but it was the best that his office afforded, and it gave him an excuse to support her in the half-reclining position that he had caused her to assume, somewhat wedged into the corner of the office, with the child and himself barring out the man who now stood at the end of the desk, surveying them all with a stranger smile than ever.

"You have your hands full now, Mr. Crowfut, and if you are like the generality of mankind you would not listen to my story with anything like an unbiased mind while you have your arm around that lady. When she is willing to come to her senses I will be happy to tell you what I know about her. She then can affirm or deny, as she pleases. My name is Jarvis Jackson, and by profession I am a detective."

"Well, sir, what have I to do with your profession? I have no desire to arrest any one. I shall not interpose, if you can show me any authority, if you arrest this lady right here in this office. But if you have no such authority, and have come here solely for the purpose of maligning her, I want you to go out before I throw you out. I have succeeded in taking care of myself this far in life, and I fail to see that I need your assistance at this late day."

"Oh, dear, no, sir. I had no idea of meeting the lady in your office. I did not know or suspect that she was within a thousand miles of this. My business is of an entirely different character. I only warned you as a matter of duty. If you think this is an intrusion I will withdraw, though it was a matter of some importance that I wished to speak with you upon. I was directed to you by a gentleman named Mackenzie Murdock who seemed to think that I would be at least decently received."

"If you have letters from Mr. Murdock I will look at them if you will call again in the course of half an hour. At present my time is occupied. Good-morning!"

Jarvis Jackson was just as iron-clad as to his feelings as the rest of his profession, and there was no sign of affront on his face. He only gave another cold glance at the lady, and, without even the ceremony of a bow, took his leave.

When he was fairly out of hearing the lady seemed to be able to speak. She smiled a little wanly at the gentleman who was so stout in her defense, caught the child up and gave it a long, lingering kiss, and then went on with her story as though there had been no interruption.

"I am here, Mr. Crowfut, in search of my husband. There are several men who are interested in my not finding him. It means over fifty thousand dollars to them if I am unsuccessful, or if they can prevent his seeing this child. In addition, there may be a large sum, or there may not, that he has accumulated by his own labors—for he has been in the West for a long time, without making a sign."

"And your husband's name, madame?"

"What name he may now bear I cannot with certainty say, and I almost fear to suggest, lest I cause some innocent person to be viewed by you with an eye of suspicion. Heaven knows that I do not wish him any harm! The name by which he was known when he married me was Simon Sanford."

Ebenezer slowly shook his head. He did not remember any man who answered to that name.

"The request I have to make of you is no doubt a strange one, but I see no other way to provide for the safety of the child. I came to you to beg of you to take her under your safe-keeping for a few days—perhaps weeks—while I go on in search of my lost husband. I cannot at present watch over her and protect her, while I

am engaged in this work. With you I feel assured that she would be safe."

The request took Mr. Crowfut by surprise. He had prepared himself to hear a plea for money, or something of that kind, and was already debating within himself what the answer should be. He would rather have heard such a petition, too. Then he could be done with the lady, who had impressed him peculiarly even at his first glimpse of her.

To say nothing of the inconvenience, the reception of the child into his family would without doubt bring them into intimate relations with this stranger, such as he did not care to have established at the present time.

Mrs. Sanford watched him with an air of painful interest. She saw the troubled look in his eyes, and that he was not inclined to favor her request.

With much earnestness she continued, giving him no opportunity for the negative that was on his lips.

"Wait a moment. Do not speak until you hear me further. I do not believe that you would do a thing of this kind for pay, if you refused for the sake of humanity. Yet I wish to convince you that it is not a charity I now ask of you—so far, at least, as money goes. At the same time that I place my daughter in your charge I wish to put ten thousand dollars in your hands. Then, no matter what happened to me, she would not be a pauper; nor would you be a loser from having befriended the child. Remember, it is not your wealth I have need of, but your protective care, while I am embarked on a mission that, from what I know of the man, or men, arrayed against me, may well end in my death. Have you the courage for the undertaking?"

"If the child was really and truly an orphan, I would have the courage to defend her against the world—or die trying. If you choose to place the girl in my care, never offering to see her or me again until the time that you are to finally take her away, she may remain. Otherwise, I will have nothing to do with the matter."

Ebenezer spoke slowly, and with his eyes cast downward, as though he was thinking as he spoke. There was a slow, steady doggedness about him that said he had made up his mind, and would not alter it very soon.

The lady caught him by the hand.

"A thousand thanks, my friend, if such I may be allowed to call you! I could have asked nothing better. Remember that whatever story you may tell it must not be the true one, and that, while the child is under your roof, she must be called Laura Lane. Should you meet me by any chance, in the mean time, I am to be addressed as Mrs. Lane. I do not think you will be called on to recognize me, however. In this package you will find the money of which I spoke. Will you look it over to see that it is all right? Come, Laura, I must take my leave of you. Be a good girl, and give Mr. Crowfut as little trouble as possible. As for you—I shall never forget your kindness. I may be able to foil the wretch yet. Farewell!"

Hurriedly the lady took her leave. Before Ebenezer could realize it she was gone, and the child was sitting demurely on the stool vacated by her mother, looking at her guardian with curious and unblinking eyes.

Ebenezer returned the gaze with interest. He was actually frightened at the rapidity of the transfer, and he held on to the roll of money, the amount of which he had hurriedly figured up, with a clutch that showed how nervous he was.

"Well, Laura," he said, trying to speak pleasantly, "I suppose you and I are going to be great friends, for a time. How old are you?"

"Fifteen years old; but, if you please, mamma said it would be better if no one knew it but yourself. I do not look so, and if it is not told, no one would suspect it. With my other dresses on I am quite a woman."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Crowfut, looking her over again with more care than ever. "So you would be. How wonderfully I have been mistaken!"

CHAPTER IV.

A WARM WELCOME.

THE bold front of the boy seemed to amuse Amariah. He smiled and listened; but when Fred ceased speaking he had no explanations to offer, but several cautious.

"Very good, small boy; very good! I like tew see spunk, an' ef it waz yewr camp I opine yew would fight 'em desp'rit, accordin' tew yewr own sort ov style. But this air my camp, an' I'm only enlistin' privates what will stay when I sez

stay, an' go when I sez go. Yew got that writ down in yewr di'ry?"

"All down but nine; set 'em up ter suit yerself."

"Ef yew camp with me tew-night, yew will sleep under the waggin an' stay thar tell Amariah sez come cut. Ef yew move afore, I wouldn't wonder ef thar war a dead boy ov much yewr style ov bigness. An' ef yew begin tew sling lead without orders—w'ich same chance it's dubersome ef yew git—yew will hev ther consarndest spankin' yew hev hed sence the fu'st time yew played hookey frum school, an' yewr mammy found yew out."

"All right, Amariah; I kin foller orders ef it bu'sts bizziness—unless lightnin' strikes your way. Then I reckon I kin boss ther job ter suit myself. I wouldn't be a mite surprised ter see you turn toes up afore mornin', an' never knowin' at all how big a fighter I kin be. Oh, you'll lose a heap ef you don't let me have a teeny chance ter hump myself afore yer starts ter climb ther golden stairs. Say! Mayn't I give 'em jest one round fur good luck? I really ain't shot a man fur a week!"

"Yew will do nothin' ov the kind—an' yew don't want tew half ez bad ez yew let on. Jest lay yewrself down, an' ef yew kin sleep straight threw it will be all the better. What happens will be none ov yewr bizziness."

It was no use to talk to Amariah with the idea of obtaining information. He was not of the kind to be pumped, even by so shrewd a boy as Little Limberleg.

Seeing this Fred gave up. He was very tired after his hard tramp, the bed under the wagon looked quite inviting when Amariah spread it out; and so, under the vehicle he crawled, stretching himself out and giving a sigh of relief.

For a time he felt that he had never been wider awake in his life. If he had only known he was going asleep perhaps the surprise might have kept his eyes open. Unfortunately, just when he least expected it they closed suddenly. Before he had been reclining there five minutes he had taken a plunge through the gate of dreams and was all unconscious of his surroundings.

Above, in the wagon, all was silent. There had not been a sound from it for an hour. Everything went to show that the camp was buried deep in slumber; and that not a soul in it was conscious of, or suspected danger.

The wagon stood under the shadow of the tree by which it had been halted, but the moonlight dropped into the little dingle surrounding it, making it so light that nothing could approach without being clearly visible. Yet, of what use was the precaution that had evidently been taken if there was no one on the watch, and the evildoers were on the move?

The night went by until the hour had arrived for the "lambs" to be on hand.

Sure enough, they were coming!

Half a dozen men crept silently through the bushes that surrounded the dingle, until they could look into the open space where Amariah had pitched his camp.

Nestor Northrup was there, and so was the man with whom he had held the conversation.

The latter gave a low grunt as he saw that the wagon lay in the shadow, and that to reach it a broad belt of light would have to be passed.

"Looks as if he was as much of a fox as ever, and not very much off his guard," whispered the man, as he took in the position.

"If he is waiting for us with a gun he can make things mighty lively before we can get to him. Unless we can rout him out—and he's too cute for that—we can't do any long range shooting on account of the girl. Maybe you would like to step over and see if he is at home—and I'll bet any figure that you want to name that you will find him there."

"On my soul, Thompson, I believe that you are afraid!" responded Northrup, in the same guarded tones.

"We can wait a few moments. If he is on the lookout he will be making the rounds before long, to see if there is any sign of trouble. If he don't come out I will lead the way in. I don't ask men to do more than follow me, and do their share of the work as soon as they get there."

"That's the kind of talk we like to hear. If you hadn't shown up to him to-night the thing would have been safe enough; but as you put him on his guard it is no more than square for you to show us that he has not taken advantage of it."

"For that matter, a man of his kind is on his guard all the time; but to-night he will be getting all the sleep he can, so as to be ready to make a long run to-morrow. I wouldn't won-

Flip-Flap Fred at Hard Pan.

der if he had it in mind to strike out for Dandy Flat. It's about the sort of place that would suit him for a refuge. Like as not he knows that the boys over there don't like my style, and that he would be tolerably safe."

Northrup spoke in a reflective way, the words seeming to be addressed to himself, rather than to his companion. Thompson understood it so, but Thompson was curious, and could not resist the opening for a question.

"But see here. If he knew that much beforehand why didn't he go there straight, and what did he come drifting down here for? If he knew you were here, and he didn't mean fight, why didn't he stay away? He might have known that I would have to cut and run."

"You tell," answered Nestor, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"He is a queer sort of a fish, anyhow; and if it was not for a cowardly streak when it comes to a pinch he might no doubt be a dangerous man. But there is no use to waste time here. I will run the chances that you seem to be afraid of, and when you see me go into the shadow, bring your men as quietly as you can. We must try and take the old fox by surprise. You and I will get the girl away, and your fellows can finish the work. You must be sure, however, that it is done."

"Go ahead! The less you say about that part of the business the better."

While they talked they watched the dingle keenly, one ear all the time turned to catch the slightest sound from the spot where the wagon was standing, but so quiet was it that Thompson began to be ashamed of his caution. As Northrup turned away, all followed him at the distance of but a few paces.

It did not take long for them to cover the short distance for which the moonlight streamed over them; and yet there was no sign that Amariah had detected their presence, or that there would be any difficulty in making the attack a complete surprise.

Under the tree, the wagon was visible. It was built something after the manner of an ambulance. It had a canvas top, and inside there was a seat on either side that served as a bed by night. At the rear end was a door, that was now open; and from within came the sound of long, regular breathing.

The victim was all ready for the sacrifice! All they had to do was to throw themselves in on Amariah. Their weight alone would be enough to crush him down. They were even able to tell to a certainty exactly where Holdfast lay.

Nevertheless the gang launched at the wagon; but

Something unexpected and terrible followed. With a noiseless flane the whole place became light as day, while the gang was flung back, as though it had run with full speed against a solid wall.

Here and there they lay, the most of the men motionless where they dropped, and one or two that still had the use of their lungs howling loud enough to speak for the rest.

As Northrup was in the advance, he had the benefit of the full shock, and dropped a little sooner asleep, if anything, than the rest.

Thompson, however, was more fortunate. He either received a lighter shock, or it did not have the same effect on him. After the first involuntary yell or two, he recovered his senses enough to understand that if there had not been a stroke of lightning, it was the next thing to it, and that they had run into a network of wires that had given them the benefit of a strong electric shock!

When he looked up at the wagon, he saw fast standing in the little doorway, with a double-barreled shotgun in his hands, the muzzle of which was pointed toward the group in an unpleasantly careless sort of a way!

"Wow!" grinned Amariah, as he caught the eye of Thompson, "ef this don't jest beat all creation! Yew fellows must hev run ag'in' the patent, double-gearied, back-actin', bu'glar-proof hoss-net. Sorry. Ef I'd a' knowned, an' yew hadn't bin in sich a ding-basted hurry, I knowt hev showed yew ther way out. Ez it is, guess yew won't need furder instructions. Gether 'em tergether, an' git 'em along outen range, fur I don't feel like furder foolin', an' et ther foolin' does go furder I'll begin ter shoot. Yew kin understand that, er I'd be sayin' I'd be doin' a heap sight wuss."

The voice of the stroller grew stern, and from the way he looked along the gun, which he brought to a poise without raising to his shoulder, it was pretty plain that he meant all that he said, if not more.

Thompson looked to his rear. It was some

little distance to the line of trees from which he had marched his men. He did not fancy the job of carrying them back, and they did not look as though they would be able to move for an hour, even if some of them were not dead. Without attempting to start an argument with the man with the drop, he said as much.

"Dead, nothin'! They will be 'round an' kickin' in ther flint ov a lamb's tail. I jest want yew out ov ther way when they begin tew jump. Yew mou't git hurt. Jest shoulder Nestor Northrup, an' travel. Ther rest will be along when yew git that."

Without a murmur Thompson did as he was ordered. He picked up Nestor Northrup, slung him over his shoulder, and away he marched.

"Now, Little Limberleg, ef yew air good fur anything yew kin hev a chance to show it," continued Amariah, as he saw that Thompson was out of hearing of the low tone in which he spoke.

"Wich ther same will do ter gamble on," responded a voice from under the wagon.

"Ef you'll tell me how ter do it 'thout gettin' knocked silly I'll come out ov ther coop an' take ther heels off ov them jolly roosters while you're a-countin' them out. They're no good jest now, but ef they come to they might think they was still in ther pit, an' try ter git in a foul blow."

"It air safe ernuf. Scramble out an' take these strings. Tie 'em hand an' foot, Flip-flap, while I keep ready fur 'em with ther shotgun. It won't do ter let the Philistines hev a chance," and the queer showman grinned his delight at his electric knock-out.

Fred had wakened at the right time, and had seen about all there was to be seen while the fun lasted. Now, he crept out without the least hesitation, took the cords that Amariah threw to him, and proceeded to obey orders in a very thorough manner. In a few moments he had the men entirely helpless. Then he looked up for further instructions.

"I hev an idea, now," said Amariah, looking at his captives, then at the edge of the dingle where the two were supposed to be, and then at his wagon.

"I think I will load 'em up an' take 'em along!"

The idea pleased the boy. He laughed softly, nodded his head, and began to turn up his sleeves, as if anxious for the work to begin.

And Azariah was in earnest in the matter. After a little more delay he went inside of the wagon, made a few arrangements, and was ready to store away his cargo.

The binding had been done effectually. The men, now conscious again, could squirm, and make the task of more or less difficulty, but they could offer no effective resistance. When they attempted to demur Amariah coldly offered to turn on the battery again, under guarantee that there would be no more trouble. As a result they allowed themselves to be hauled into the vehicle without opposition.

Then Amariah gave a whistle so low and soft that it could hardly have been heard a hundred yards away; there was a sound of horses' feet on the turf, and Fanny came up quickly with the team that had been hidden so securely it had wholly escaped the eyes of Northrup and his men.

"And now fur ther triumphal march ter Hard Pan," laughed Limberleg, in high glee as Amariah gave the signal to start.

CHAPTER V.

THE HONEY GATHERED AT THE "HIVE."

In front of the "Hive" saloon three strollers halted, just after the dusk of the following evening came down. Amariah was there; Fanny was there; and so, also, was Fairy Fred, the boy with the limber leg.

The screeching of the catgut, as Amariah tuned a violin, announced their coming to those inside; and without, quite a crowd of loiterers had already gathered. If Amariah was not already acquainted with his ground he had certainly made a most judicious guess. Nowhere else in Hard Pan would he have hit upon a spot where he would have stood so good a chance to gather in coin, and at the same time receive decent treatment for himself and his protégés while pursuing the avocations they were about to essay. The Hive had all sorts of patrons; but the king-pins of them all were men who were the exponents of fair play, who did not allow non-combatants to be imposed on while within the precincts of the saloon.

In this they were only backing up the proprietor, Harry Harper, who had announced his intentions when he had opened the house in the first place; and with their assistance had been

able to carry out his intentions even better than he had hoped for.

Yet there was no place in the town—and there were "places" by the score—where there was more fun going on; or more popular with the men who wanted amusement, and were willing to pay their money, and get the worth of it, with the right change back. Harry Harper sold whisky for a living, and kept several games running for profit; but he was not only willing but anxious to provide other incidentals, for the sake of entertainment, pure and simple.

So it was that when Amariah stopped outside, and flourished his bow, Harry, who happened to be lounging at the door, invited him in, and by so doing made him free of the house.

Amariah nodded to the invitation, played a few bars of a lively tune on his violin, and then, extending his bow with a flourish, in a solemn voice repeated:

"By innocent amusements we thrive,
Here comes a load ov honey for the hive."

Then he gravely marched through the door, followed by Fanny and the boy.

"All right, now. If you have any occasion walk up to the bar and saturate. As for the kids, I suppose they don't indulge, or I wouldn't slight 'em. We will treat you white here, and we want the best you have in the shop, regardless. Do your level best; and if you don't suit, stop when you get the hint. After that you can look around like any other man; or go away when you have a mind to. While you are at work you are my guest, and the man that treats you bad settles with me. Now, that makes you at home. Blow on your fingers and get to work as soon as you have a mind to. Only, don't pass around the hat until we have a chance to see what your lay is, and what you can do."

"We do our best, and study now to please,
Drink only in our hours of ease,
O'er the whole earth we gayly roam,
And find with all mankind a home.
Live while we live, and this our only plan,
Man's proper game—diverting man."

So answered Amariah, beaming mildly around on his audience, a glass of whisky in his hand, which he emptied in the orthodox fashion by way of peroration.

"A very good game it is," remarked Mr. David Collins, who was one of the listeners; "but for a steady article of diet I should prefer draw-poker."

"It is the exception proves the law.
Condemn him not whose inner instincts turn to draw."

chimed in Amariah.

"Thar's even some men who kin hold up their eends at all both. Frum the one they turn tew the other ez nat'r'l ez a bumblebee takes tew clover. I play ther fiddle myself, w'ich air good ernuf.

With tumbling Fred and dancing Fan,
It's time, I think, the sport began."

When Amariah spoke he had a dialect of his own; when he spouted doggerel he had another tone, and a pronunciation that was in the main correct. He turned away from Dave Collins with a bow that indicated that nothing more need be said, drew the bow sharply across the strings of his instrument, and looked at Fred, who dropped on his hands, made a revolution or two that cleared space before them, and then began a clever contortion act, interspersed with neck-springs, hand-springs, and winding up with a back somerset from a handkerchief which he had thrown on the floor, and on which he again squarely alighted.

The performance was more than good-naturedly, it was delightedly received. Amariah proved to be a musician of no mean skill, and the boy, in all his movements, kept time to the violin. Of course there had been some kind of a rehearsal during the day, but Fanny herself, who watched the boy curiously, appeared both astonished and delighted. He was even more clever than she had believed.

When Fred had finished his act and retired, Amariah played on his violin, and furnished some fine music, the like of which had seldom been heard by his audience. Such sweet strains as he evolved actually brought the moisture to several eyes, and softened some of the stoutest. When he glided into a waltz movement Fred opened the circle a little wider by throwing a ring of cart-wheels, and into the middle of the vacant space glided Miss Fanny.

When she entered the Hive the girl had worn a cloak that reached to her heels. This she dropped at Fred's feet as she moved forward, and appeared in a neat, becoming costume, fitted for the work. In time to the music she floated around the ring, turning as she went her arms outstretched, thus marking out th-

Flip-Flap Fred at Hard Pan.

limits for the crowd, that seemed inclined to encroach upon the circle.

Around the bottom of Fan's skirt was a row of little bells that tinkled as she moved, and in her hands she held castanets, which now she struck in time to the notes of Amariah's violin. The violin gave sweet sounds; Fred stood looking on with his eyes full of pleasure; Fanny glided, whirled, swam and posed, the very picture of youth, beauty and grace; while the crowd looked on with too rapt an attention to move a hand, or utter a sound until the performance came to a close.

Then there was a clapping of hands, and a chorus of delighted exclamations that fairly shook the roof. The exhibition, brief though it was, had taken the audience where they lived, and no one was at all slow about expressing his satisfaction.

If there had been anything of a stage, no doubt the coin would have begun to shower without further invitation; but throwing coin on the floor in the Hive was not altogether the best way for it to reach its intended destination, high-toned resort though it was. And then there was something about Miss Fanny that did not altogether agree with the idea of a hat being passed around by her.

"My friend," said Harry Harper, tapping Amariah lightly on the back, "there's big money in all this; but you don't want to give them any time to cool. Collect your taxes early and often. Go for them now; and go for them by and by when you can catch more that have come in. As long as you do any work, Hard Pan will pay heavy for anything she sees, and if you don't hit it large I am a Dutchman."

"Thanks, my friend, but the gentleman that slings the hat hasn't yet arrived. He had a sore head, an' mebbe it war ez well not tew bring him into the congregation of the onrighteous. Perhaps he will arrive, and prehaps he won't; but,

"Money's no object when the fun is high,
Gaze now—we'll tap your purses by and by."

Then Amariah began a series of sleight of hand tricks, such as are common enough to those who have seen jugglers at work, but done better than the average. Meantime he kept up a fire of rhymes and quaint remarks that amused the crowd and attracted attention to himself. For over half an hour this exhibition lasted, and there was no dropping off of the audience. On the contrary, at the expiration of that time, the room was packed almost to suffocation with enthusiastic spectators, who cheered to the echo.

There was nothing small about Harry Harper but his size, and he was anxious that Amariah should reap a substantial reward for the amusement he had been furnishing. As Holdfast made no move toward securing it, he spoke again, and this time he spoke to the crowd:

"While they are leaning back, taking a rest, would be as good a time as any to pass around the hat; and as the gent won't do it for himself, maybe we ought to do it for him. I move we have a committee, and do the thing up according to Gunter. If there is any snide here that wants to take in the circus all for nothing, it will be a good chance for him to sneak out now, before the committee starts on its rounds. And when he goes he needn't be in a hurry about coming back again. If there is any one here that left his purse at home he can call around on me and his face will be good for a small loan to put in the box."

The suggestion of Harry Harper was just the thing to hit the crowd in their present humor, and would have no doubt been carried into execution instanter had it not been for Amariah, who held up his hand and shook it vigorously, in token of dissent.

"A minnit, gentlemen, jest a blessid leetle minnit. My treasurer's a-comin' now, an' he'll 'tend tew that part ov the performance. I kin trust him with untold gold. Ef he don't drop it we kin bet that he won't smuggle none ov it for his own use. Thar ain't no nobler work than Dandy, nowhere. He's jest honest frum the ground up. An' thar he is now."

At the rear door of the saloon sounded a loud "Woof!" and in stalked the bear, on its hind legs, holding in its fore-paws an immense tin wash-basin. He had no other preliminary remarks to make, for with a comical gravity he turned to the first man he met, and presented the basin.

"We've done our best to treat you fair.
Now drop your pence, nor monkey with the bear," chanted Amariah by way of warning; and amidst a general hurrah of laughter, Dandy began to pass around the contribution-box, and receive a generous answer to his tacit request for coin.

CHAPTER VI.

"MURDER'S THE CHARGE."

THERE was a novelty about seeing such a treasurer that produced a good deal of merriment. Perhaps the general amount of the collection would have been larger if Miss Fanny had passed the wash-basin herself, but it is not so certain that there would have been such unanimous donations, even after the hint that Harry had given.

Dandy had nothing to say about the size of the gift, but a gift he wanted from everybody; and he asked for it very much after the manner of the stranger with a horse-pistol that one meets after dark in a lonely lane, asking for a friendly loan. The man that drew back without first chinking something in the pan was saluted with a growl and a showing of teeth that was a little trying to the nerves.

With the laugh so generally against him, the man thus honored by Dandy's protest could do nothing save shrink away with a growl of his own, or else reconsider his determination and drop an offering where it belonged. The three or four who had attempted to escape the treasurer were marked out pretty well, though the audience did not catch on to Dandy's meaning until the second protest gave them a chance to consider what it was about.

"Very good, Dandy, very good," said Amariah, receiving the basin from the bear.

"Don't think that many ov 'em got away this time. We'll put ther proceeds in ther sack, an' then yew kin show them what yew know yewrself."

Gravely from his pocket Amariah drew a two-bushel sack, into which he poured the collection.

"Didn't 'spect tew git it full ther fu'st time, gents; but in ther course ov ther evenin' we kin gether a good bit ov sp'iles. Sit down on it, Fred, tell I put Dandy through his paces."

But Dandy did not wait to be instructed as to what was wanted of him. He went to work on his own account, after he had soberly watched the pouring of the coin into the sack.

First he turned a succession of clumsy somersets around the outer edge of the ring, much after the manner that Fred had done. As he was as heavy as a good many boys, and somewhat clumsy to boot, he made the floor shake, and no one wanted to be in his way when he came down. Then he righted himself and paraded around the ring on his hind feet, after which he reversed himself, and made the promenade with his hind feet in the air.

By this time Amariah had put his coin in the keeping of the boy, and had got his fiddle again. He drew the bow sharply across the strings a time or two, and then began a waltz movement. Dandy was right side up and was bowing to Fanny, who courtesied and stepped forward. Very protectingly did the one paw of the bear drop to her waist, and away they went slowly around the circle, in very good time to the music. As a dancer Dandy proved himself a success.

After that Amariah called him up, and proceeded to put him through a round of tricks, none of them very wonderful, but altogether making quite a creditable performance. Then, with a flourish of his hand, he caused Dandy to sink down by the side of the boy, while he briefly addressed the crowd.

"Thet closes the evenin's entertainment, so fur ez we be consarned. Ef yew strike us to-morrer night thar will be a entire change ov preformance. Thankin' yew one an' all, an' Mr. Harper most ov all, we bid yew all good-night."

"Business may be over, but there is no use to be in a rush," answered Harper.

"If you will just let me get a little of my work in I don't care how long you stay. Fact is, I'd like to have a little talk at you. Maybe you could explain a story that some of the boys were talking of this morning, that seems mighty mysterious."

"I'm a man ov myst'ry," answered Amariah, with a slow shake of his head.

"Ef I kin unravel arything thet's aggitatin' yer mind I'll do it an' welcome, but I ain't got long tew tarry. Ther night air's bad fur ther kids, an' Dandy likes tew keep airy hours."

The conversation had not attracted much attention, and Harry saw that the stream had set in for the bar, where the force of tumbler-jugglers was large enough to accommodate the patronage that might now be expected. He leaned confidentially toward Holdfast.

"Just about sunrise this morning there was a man coming in from the Flat, where he had been wasting his time over an all-night game. He saw a wagon stop at the edge of town, and a man and a boy begin to unload what looked like a pile of stiffs. They were straight as pokers,

and when they were corded up by the side of the road you couldn't tell them from a heap of railroad ties. Then the man and the boy got into the wagon and drove on into town. Do you know anything about what it all meant?"

"Reckon they warn't so very dead? Eh?"

"That was the queer part of it all. When he went to investigate he found they were all sitting up, growling like so many bears with sore heads. As he got nearer, they all got up and marched off together in the direction the wagon came from."

Softly did Amariah laugh.

"They were bad men—in their minds—and jumped onto my camp last night. I didn't keer tew turn 'em loose, an' so brung 'em along till I didn't need tew watch 'em any longer. Then I kerried 'em out, and piled 'em up alongside ovther road, ez you say, like so much cord-wood."

"Good for you. But you want to keep your eyes wide open while you stay around this burg. Next time they won't be so spry about moving into your camp; but they will take a good deal surer plan—a sitting shot as you go by. You know who you were dealing with?"

"Ez wal ez ther next—mebbe. Ef I don't keep a weather eye open, it won't be fur too much confidence 'round ther gang. But aller same, it may be I can't allers hev sich luck. Ef so be, I'll hev ter pass in ther checks an' let them go on with the'r game."

Amariah winked shrewdly as he spoke; and left the impression that if he did not look after the parties it would not be because he would not have both eyes open, and watching for them.

"Glad you know the sort that were onto you—and if you got away from them, and had a chance to take their luggage when you went, I guess you are no man's fool as long as you know something of the sort of ground you have to travel over. I thought I would give you a wink, anyhow. Be glad to see you any time—come in when you feel like it; and if you want to start the show going don't wait for an invitation. You are free of the house, and can't well go wrong as long as you meander around the Hive. So-long! Hope we will see you all later."

The conversation had taken but little time, and was well meant on the part of Harper; but it was not the best thing in the world to have delayed Amariah, even for that little length of time, when he was all ready to depart, and would have been a dozen rods away.

That is, it was not best for the peace and quietness of the Hive. To Azariah it did not make so much difference, as no doubt the party that was seeking him could have found him on the street as well as in the saloon; and either place was about the same to Azariah Holdfast. His little troupe was bunched near the rear of the saloon, where a door in the end of the building opened back into what would have been a yard if there had been a fence around it. He had intended to make his exit in that way, since it would save pushing through the crowd that filled the front part of the room; and it was at a wink from him that Fanny had led the way in that direction. When Harper and Amariah turned to separate, her hand was on the latch, and in another instant she would have led the way out into the night.

Her eyes were keen, however; and something that she saw at that moment caused her to more than hesitate. To the surprise of Fred, she not only pushed the door, which she had slightly opened, back to its place, but as quickly turned the key in the lock, and then shot a great bolt that was above the lock. She was not only not going out herself, but she did not intend that for the present any one else should either go out or in.

There was no doubt a reason for the movement, and Fred looked around in search of it. He had a quick eye, too, and thought that he could detect if there had been any change in the look of affairs, that might betoken danger.

Without a doubt there were some new faces in the front of the room, and their owners were drifting along as though they might be in a hurry to pass through the crowd, but at the same time were anxious not to attract attention to themselves.

Then he looked toward Amariah, to note if he was aware of the intrusion—and saw that he was, since one of the intruders had already reached him. In front of him was standing a great, burly-looking fellow, looking him over in a critical sort of way that had a reminder of a professional air about it.

He was not a very pleasant-looking sort of a fellow, either.

He was broad of face, and broad of shoulders.

He had a dirty fist, that looked heavy enough to floor an ox if the muscles above it undertook to send it on that duty; and he was larger around the waist than about the shoulders, which was saying a good deal.

His face was covered with a stubby beard of several inches in length, that looked as though it had not made the acquaintance of a comb for weeks; and the long hair that stuck out from under the battered old black hat that was drawn tightly down on his head was even more matted and tangled.

"Yer name's Amariah Holdfast, ain't it?" asked this fellow, suddenly tapping Amariah on the shoulder, to call attention to him and his query.

"Sich air ther current report," responded Amariah, coldly looking the fellow over. Of course, this intrusion meant mischief, and Holdfast was not to be taken off his guard.

"Sometimes knowed ez Cyrus Dawling?"

"Not ez I am aware ov. An' now, my frien', mebbe yew would answer a pair ov questions? What air yeur name, an' what do yew want? I hev no time fur tomfoolery, an' ef ther reponse ain't ontirely satisfactory I shell hev tew tear myself away, even ef su'thin' rips in ther opera-shun."

The conversation attracted attention. The burly man was a stranger to the Hive, and his looks were not in his favor; while Amariah, as a *protégé* of the proprietor, had the call on the sympathies of the house. The stranger from the door had got considerably rearer by this time; but so had a number of those who had seen the performances.

"I don't mind givin' my hannie, an' my bizziness along with it; but it's because ther gents ez hangs 'round this shebang may feel kinder an int'rest; an' it'll 'spain things to 'em az they go along. I'm Happy Hank, ther lightnin' detective frum Gideon's Bar, an' I want to talk with you mighty bad—an' so does ther c'rowner ov that rustlin' burg. Ef it's all ther same ter you, I'll jest take you in now, an' you kin hev ther conversation later on. Murder's ther charge, an' ef ther's arv foolishness my men 'll use ther irons."

CHAPTER VII.

DANDY HOLDS UP HIS END.

If the face of the man had been unfamiliar to the frequenters of the Hive, the name was not. Hank Daroy, otherwise Happy Hank, had a wide-spread reputation. It was rather a stretch of courtesy to call him a detective, since no one had ever heard of his doing any remarkable work in ferreting out the authors of any mysterious crimes; but as a hound to trail down the game that once was started, he was known as one of the boldest and most successful deputy-sheriffs in the West. When he marked a man it was not so certain that he was guilty, but it was a reasonably sure thing that Hank would run him to earth before he lost the trail.

Amariah seemed to be familiar with the name, though its announcement did not appear to disconcert him at all.

"That's sayin' a heap," he retorted coolly.

"Ef yew be Happy Hank, an' ef yew hev a warrant fur Amariah Holdfast, it'd be ther p'int ov wisdom tew play coon an' come down. But ez I hev my doubts ov all both, I'd advise tew keep yewr hand off my shoulder, an' yewr irons where we cain't see 'em, tell them questions be settled."

The man had been watching his chance, and thought he saw it now. His answer to Amariah's warning was a spring, quicker and more vicious than an ordinary observer would have expected of a person of his build.

His hand shot out, and seemed to bury itself in Amariah's neck, while there was a rush that almost brought some two or three of the strange men to his side.

Then, without any effort as it would seem, the advantage was reversed. The fingers touched Amariah's neck; but they never closed there. Down slid Holdfast until his head was almost on a level with the waist of the other, and then as suddenly and easily he straightened up again, with Darby in his grasp. With a sudden shake he flung the huge body away from him, and turned toward the men who were supposed to be Happy Hank's partners.

Darby fell with a crash and lay motionless. As he struck on the broad of his back no bones were broken, but the breath was so completely knocked out of his body that it was several minutes before his choking gasps subsided and he was able to sit up and stare around in a half-wondered sort of way.

In that time there was a change in affairs

that made it seem less than ever like his night on.

The glance that Azariah took showed him that the men of the Hive were going to give him fair play, even with detectives. They had marked the strangers at last, and without the delay of an instant had swung in front of them in a determined sort of way, and the appearance of revolvers was the signal for action, as prompt as it was bold.

"If you please, gentlemen," said Harper advancing, a six-shooter in his fist.

"When there is a racket in my house I am the man to interfere—and as long as they don't break things, I generally want to give two gentlemen who have a difference of opinion a chance to fight it out. While it is an even thlng between those two, and nobody getting killed, you will please keep on the back shelf. If you don't I will be under the painful necessity of using this gun myself. You hear me whisper?"

As several others were whispering for fair play in the same vigorous manner there was a halt in the rush; and all this gave Amariah a chance to renew his attentions to his fallen adversary. It was done so deftly that no one saw what he was about, when he leaned over and swept his hands over the breast of the gasping man.

Nevertheless, in that hurried motion he had drawn from its hiding-place in an inner breast-pocket a bundle of papers. When Hank came a little to his senses Amariah was coolly looking over his capture, and seemed to be paying no attention to its owner.

A glance or two was sufficient to make him acquainted with the contents of the package; and then he hastily thrust it away, before any one had observed that it was in his possession, and just in time to evade Happy Hank's first glance.

"It strikes me yew ain't makin' half ther noise in ther world yew set out to do," he remarked to the slowly-rising man.

"Ef I war yew I would be shootin', shoutin', an' jest a-makin' folks think merry Hades war ter pay inside. Then, mebbe, yew could git what yew kim arter, w'ich war not me, by a long sight."

Amariah gave a suspicious glance toward the door at which his little flock had halted. Fanny caught the look, and nodded reassuringly. She also pointed at the bolt, as much as to say that she understood, and was not to be caught napping. On one side of her stood Fairy Fred, while on the other was Dandy, his face as solemn as that of a bear could well be. If it was on her account Amariah was anxious, he could see that she had looked after herself as well as the circumstances would allow. He answered the nod of the girl with another of the same kind, and turned again to the burly gentleman who at last was slowly rising from the floor. The by-play had taken but a moment.

"Dollars ter dimes yer can't do it again!" exclaimed the fellow, as he regained his feet, and taking a step forward without a sign of anger in either face or voice.

"Yer caught me off my guard, an' did what no man I war tryin' ter collar ever done afore. I ain't bearin' malice; but I want ter know ef you be a better man than Happy Hank. It may be it's gittin' time fur him ter go inter some other biz. Ef it are he oughter know it."

"Twouldn't do yew a mite ov good, honey, I kin tell yew, without ary braggin', that yew hev met a man thet's jest ez good ez Hank Darby ever war er will be. I don't say thet he's ary better, 'cause ernuf's ernuf, an' ary more would be hipperty-hop. I don't pile it on tew thick when ther fax speak for the'rselfes."

"That ain't puttin' up good money on it. A fair show, an' I kin down yer—an' hyer's ther dollars ez sez so."

In his fist the man shook a roll of bills that looked to be of large denomination, and he seemed to be in the deepest earnest.

"Thanks fur ther chainte tew amuse ther boys, but I ain't a prize-fighter, an' I only let out ther links when I see my gizzard's a'-pendin' on it. Yew hed better go hum afore su'thin' happens, an' ther' won't be money in it fur no one, neither."

"When I go home I'll be takin' you along, dead er alive. I give yer ther chance ter break my neck an' make money a-doin' ov it. More fool you fur not takin' ov it. Now—han's up! I'm a-goin' fur you ter keep."

And then arose suddenly the wildest uproar that had been heard in the Hive for many a day. The little couversation, brief though it was, and the sight of the money that had been produced, called the attention of Harper and his friends from the men they had intercepted to the men

who were the center of the affair. The result was something that was a surprise to the most of the spectators. There was no general or particular attack, and it was hard to see who was the object, or what, of the assault. But there were yells and something worse than yells; there was the rattle of fire-arms, and what seemed to be a deadly struggle going on in the center of the room.

Fairy Fred had a chance to understand what it all meant—at least, he thought he did. In the height of the din, when a sound could not be distinctly heard for any distance, and two or three girls could have yelled at the top of their lungs without attracting attention, the door at his back was tried, cautiously at first, and then with a firmer hand. When it did not yield a heavy body came against it with a bang that threatened to burst it from its hinges.

Harper knew what he was about when he put up his building. The doors were framed to resist a siege, and there was no sign of giving.

Again the assault was made—and again without result that was visible on the inside. Some one was seeking to make a hurried entrance; and some one had been baffled.

Fanny heard the sounds and looked at Fred.

"They don't catch us asleep," was what her eyes said; and just then Fred darted forward like a battering-ram, his head held low down, and aimed fairly at the stomach of a man who was hurriedly pushing toward the girl. The fellow held a blanket in his hands, and though it was doubled up so as not to be readily noticed there was no doubt in the mind of Limberleg what it was for. Nestor Northrup had, probably, something to do with this, and the object was the capture of Funny Fan. This man was doubtless to throw the blanket around the head of the girl, and hand her out to the man or men now trying to enter by the rear door.

He reckoned without Fred. The hard little head had caught him on the spot it was aimed at, and the breath left his body at once.

"Tell Dandy ter sit down on him! We ain't no place ter run to, an' ef we hev ter stay here we may'z well save what we get till we see what we'd better do with 'em."

Fred had tumbled along with the man, but was on his feet in an instant, spluttering as he arose.

The suggestion was not without its value, and Fanny acted upon it immediately. By the time that the fellow had his eyes open enough to take any notice of outside affairs Dandy was squatting unconcernedly on the spot that had just been made sore by contact with Fairy Fred's crown. As nothing had been said about sitting down easy, Bruin had plumped himself so solidly that the man underneath, without knowing who or what he was, thought that some one had dropped on him who weighed a ton. And when he fairly got sight of the long, hairy face, the grinning jaws that displayed a savage array of teeth, and the long tongue that was lolling out so near to his face, it was no wonder that great was the scream he gave when the idea flashed across his mind that he had passed over the last river, and this was one of the denizens of the lower regions.

The yell had no particular effect on Dandy. He kept his seat, and only suffered his eyes to wander across, toward Amariah. He would take an order or two from Fanny; but he recognized Holdfast as his real master.

Amariah was sufficiently busy just then to have nothing to suggest. The man who had announced himself as from Gideon's Bar was giving him a surprising amount of employment.

This t'me there was no nonsense. He struck ponderous blows, one after another. Any one of them would have settled the question of Amariah's resistance if it had taken effect; and Azariah had full occupation for a little while in seeing that they did not connect.

Still, the wonder-man did not draw a weapon. Though there was a good deal of shooting going on, no one so far gave any signs of having been hit. It was possible that there was a good deal of fuss and feathers about the affair—though Holdfast had a shrewd idea that if the opportunity offered itself there were men about who would not hesitate to kill him. The room, however, was rapidly darkening with smoke. Some one was burning a good deal of bad powder.

In the face of the rain of blows Amariah kept his wits about him, and waited for his time to come. At last it seemed that the line of friends, on whom he was depending, gave signs of wavering. Having waited for some time to see what was the meaning of all this before going into the fight, it began to look as though they were making up their minds to stay out altogether, and to step out of the way.

At that suspicion Amariah only waited long enough for Hank to strike once more, and then he cross-countered terrifically. From the shoulder out went the blow, straight as a die, and the result was all that he could have wished for. Hank was lifted fairly off of his feet, and driven solidly into the crowd, that was thus thrown into some confusion.

With a sharp whistle and a snap of the thumb and finger, he turned to Dandy; and Bruin lumbered forward. A gesture and the bear rolled heels over head through the window, and without the delay of a second, Amariah and his protégés followed.

CHAPTER VIII.

AMARIAH MAKES A TOUR OF INSPECTION.

THE day following the affair at the Hive, the particulars of Holdfast's appearance, the exhibition which he and his companions had given, and the singular finale to the evening's entertainment, were all well known in the various saloons and places of resort in Hard Pan. What it had all been about was more than was generally understood; but it was considered that the spectators had got the worth of their money, and that Amariah had shown himself to be a wonder of a man.

There was some curiosity in regard to Happy Hank, moreover. He had risen from the floor, stared around, learned that Amariah had vanished, and then, without a word of either anger or regret, had taken his departure. The men who had seemed to be in collusion with him had also managed to slip away without being called to book for the little damage they had done, and the vast amount of noise they had made. The following morning nothing was to be seen of them; and some casual inquiry revealed no traces that might show which way they had gone. It was a case of mysterious disappearance; and if Amariah had also been missing it is likely that public opinion would have suspected Darby and his men of having followed him up, and got away with him after all. The retreat, though it was deftly managed, had, of course, been noticed by some, and had been looked on as an injudicious move. If Amariah wanted fair play, and everything open and aboveboard, he would have been more apt to have it if affairs came to a crisis at the Hive than in the loneliness of his own camp, which was understood to be somewhere outside of, though near the town.

But Amariah was not missing at all. He turned up, strolling through the town, with the small boy at his heels. He made several purchases at the stores, did not seem at all alarmed about his safety, asked few questions; and finally dropped in at the office of Ebenezer Crowfut.

When Amariah knocked softly at the door, Crowfut requested him to enter, although he had a visitor at the time. Perhaps if it had not been for the visitor, he would not so readily have admitted him.

Jarvis Jackson had returned; and after showing the letter from Mackenzie Murdock, had opened up a conversation that was not altogether pleasant to Ebenezer, since it was interspersed with questions that, though carefully worded, seemed to have a bearing on the lady visitor of the preceding afternoon.

"I am not a detective, Mr. Jackson," he had just said; "and though an old settler, so to speak, I have never made it a matter of habit to keep track of the other inhabitants. I have been doing a cash business, and the going and coming of the population, in the main, has been of little interest to me. I would be glad to accommodate Mr. Murdock in almost any way that was in my power; but this is entirely out of my line."

"But there are thousands depending on it!" exclaimed Jackson. "I might almost say millions. It is not only a matter of right, but a matter of money. The person who sets me, or those who employ me, on the track of Simon Sanford, could almost command his reward. Look at it in its pecuniary sense, if you will not in any other."

For all the sign his face gave, Ebenezer Crowfut might as well have never before heard the name of Simon Sanford. He showed no sign of recognizing it, at all events. He thought that Mr. Jackson was very much mistaken if he imagined he could draw out of him anything of what Mrs. Sanford had told him, by such roundabout methods as this; and if the man was actually in search of Simon Sanford, why, as his interests and those of the lady appeared to clash, he was committed to the other side.

It was just at this juncture that Amariah Holdfast came in, with a bow and a scrape.

"Excuse me; but this air Mister Ebenezer Crowfut, I conceit?"

Without the smallest attention to Jarvis Jackson, he addressed the merchant, who did not evince any impatience at the interruption.

"You are correct, and if you have any business I will be at your disposal in a moment or two. I have been interviewing this gentleman; but we have little more to say to each other. If you will take a seat I can attend to you soon."

Since the previous day there had been a slight change in the furnishing of the room. Ebenezer had seen that circumstances could arise in which the poverty of his office in fixtures would be a disadvantage, and had introduced a couple of common, hard-seated chairs. One of these was already occupied by Jarvis Jackson, and without hesitation Amariah possessed himself of the other.

Nevertheless, it was not in the Holdfast nature to wait for anybody.

"Mebbe it would be a heap sight ther quickest tew git rid ov me first off. Ef you know what I want tew know I might be prevailed on tew stop awhile. Otherwise, an' ef not, time air money, an' I better be goin'. This gent looks ez though he didn't think he could git threw in no sich time ez yew menshun, an' so, mebbe, yew hed better cast yewr awrickulars in this d'rect-shun, an' let him be considerin'. Hope I don't intrude, all ther same."

There was something ludicrous about the way that Azariah threw in this afterthought, that made Crowfut smile.

"No intrusion at all. Business is business—and you would hardly call here without it. If you will state the nature of yours I will be able to judge better whether it should take precedence of that of this gentleman. Unless, indeed, it should be of a private nature."

"Nothin' that ther hull world mightn't hear. Azariah Amariah Holdfast is not a man ov secrets. I wanted tew ask ef yew ever knew a man by ther name ov Simon Sanford?"

An exclamation of disgust rose to the lips of Ebenezer. Here was a third party in search of this Simon Sanford—and they all came directly to him—as though he knew anything about the man!

"It makes no difference, then, if that be your errand. I can dispose of you both together. I have just been trying to persuade this gentleman that I know nothing about such a personage; and from what little I have heard of him am very glad that I don't. These men that hide, and have to be hunted up, and all that, are generally unmitigated rascals. And that is the class to which I am inclined to think that your friend belongs. If you will both accept that as an answer, and take your departure together, you will be doing me a favor. I have something to do besides worrying my mind for reminiscences of Simon Sanford."

"Then yew really believe that ther' is such a pusson?"

Amariah managed to get a great deal of mild incredulity into his tone, and meantime looked at Jarvis Jackson in a reproachful sort of way, as though the remark was intended as much for him as for Ebenezer.

"Eh! Bless my soul! And so there is a doubt of it? Glad to hear it. Thought the name was not familiar. Glad you called, since it gives me a new idea. Mr. Jackson, I must first be satisfied on this point before I can listen to any suggestions about overhauling my memory, and looking through my old day-books on any such a wild-goose chase. Very good suggestion, that. Is there such a man? Take it out with you, Mr. Jackson, and look it over. When you have any proofs call again. Anything that I can do for my old friend Murdock will be done most cheerfully; but before I go further in this I must know, is there such a man?"

The merchant spoke rapidly, and cheerfully. The point was well taken. When Jarvis Jackson furnished proofs of the existence of such a man—past or present—he would no doubt at the same time avail enough of the past life of that individual to give a more satisfactory explanation of why he was being hunted now. It was well enough to say that there was money in it. Of course, there was, or this trouble would be saved—but so far, no one had explained why the man was missing, or why his return was an object worth working for. However loyal he might be to the lady, Crowfut was not above the failings of human nature, and his curiosity was more than ever excited by this brief and pertinent query.

Jarvis Jackson did not think it was conclu-

sive. On the contrary, it opened up the whole subject again. He cast a glance at Amariah, which, however, was not exactly one of gratitude, and began at Ebenezer:

"Bless your soul as much as you want to, but listen to sense a little, at the same time. The only way to prove that there is such a person is to find him; and the only way to do that is to go back to a starting-point where we have him sure enough, and then trace him along down to the present time, or note where he drops out. It is certain that he was here in the early history of the place; but the early settlers have mostly gone the way of all flesh. Those that are left behind are unaccountably unwilling to try to refresh their memories; and some of them seem to have no memories at all. You, Mr. Crowfut, could aid me if you would and I believe that you will if you think the matter over. I know that I approached you at an inopportune time, and in an unfortunate way, for which I feel like again apologizing. If you will allow me to call once more, perhaps by that time you will have somewhat modified your views. At present I shall only say good-morning. You can conclude your business with this gentleman at your leisure."

Having said this in a deprecating sort of way, Jarvis Jackson bowed politely and took his departure.

"Very good hit, that, of yours; and served the purpose of getting rid of that man, whom I confess I do not like. Was it a chance shot, or do you really know something about this wanted man?"

"It air no wonder yew don't like Mister Jackson. Most people don't like a detective, an' he hez his bizziness writ on his face. It war not prezackly a chainte shot, sence it war fairly aimed, an' hit about whar I wanted it tew go. I hev an eent'rest in Simon Sanford's affairs—sich ez it is—an' I'm 'most main anxious tew find out what I kin about him. Ez a open secret, I hev his darter in tow, an' I'm lookin' round tew see ef I kin dew her ary good. I've heard thar's money sumwhar; an' I don't know arybody wants it wuss than her an' Amariah Holdfast."

"Her daughter!"

Ebenezer was once more astounded. Here was a second daughter—was this also a genuine article, or was it made to order? And was Amariah an independent investigator; or was he in the employ of Jarvis Jackson?

"Excuse me. I sed his darter—not hern. She's a estimable young lady, an' kin walk ther tight-rope like a leetle angel. I hed thort ov bringin' her along; but I hed ter leave sum'un ter keep Dandy straight, an' ther boy sin't quite ez well 'quainted with ther b'ar. Ef yew want ter see her I kin bring her ary time yew menshun; er we'll be happy ter see yer at hum—our hum. Arter that, I'll hev a propersition ter make."

"Good heavens! Here is another of them. And what was it that you thought of proposing?"

"Knowin' ez I do ther kindness ov heart ov Ebenezer Crowfut, I hed thort p'raps you'd be willin' tew take ther leetle gal inter yewr family a bit, ez a boarder, while I look 'round after this missin' dad ov hern."

"Of course. Never heard anything more modest in my life. She walks the tight-rope, and performs a trained bear. She is exactly the style of young lady that I have been yearning for in my family, no doubt. Certainly, sir. Shall be glad to accommodate you. Bring her along at your earliest convenience. And if you find this scallywag father of hers, bring him along, too. I might add that the opinion of my wife, who has the internal management of my residence, might not be exactly the same as mine; and to make the matter a fixed fact it would be as well to get her views on the subject; but as far as I am concerned you need not hesitate."

"Glad to hear that you have not altogether forgotten her," shouted a shrill voice.

"Mrs. Crowfut is here to speak for herself, and she puts her foot down hard, and says, no!"

CHAPTER IX.

FANNY IS NOT FOUND AT HOME.

MRS. CROWFUT was a lady who had her own way when she wanted it; and she generally wanted it all the time. In the matter of Laura Lane she had accepted the statement of her husband without expressing any opinion at all, or indeed giving it a second thought. When he asked if the daughter of a customer of his could spend a few days with them she had simply assented, her mind being occupied just then

with other things. Then Ebenezer brought in the child, at whom his wife looked in a far-away sort of manner, and the introduction of the stranger into the household was complete. She was not noticed again that evening, save to have pointed to her the sleeping accommodations that were to be hers; and for this she was thankful. Like Mrs. Crowfut, she had her own thoughts, upon which she did not then care to have others intrude.

But the next morning Mrs. Crowfut discovered that the child was not so much of a child as she had thought. Fortunately, at the same time she took a liking to her or she might have made it uncomfortable for her liege lord, and (supposed) master, who had either allowed himself to be hoodwinked, or else had attempted to perform that operation upon her. The two had some little conversation together, and then Mrs. Crowfut took her guest out for a walk, which had the office as one of its stopping places. And thus it happened that Mrs. Crowfut was there to speak for herself when Amariah made his proposition.

A woman who has roughed it for a dozen years of frontier life, even as the wife of a gradually prospering merchant, generally means what she says, and what she says is remarked in earnest that can hardly be mistaken. After the way she suited the action to the word, and brought her foot down as she spoke, Amariah would hardly be hopefully able to repeat his request.

Nor did he. The appearance of Mrs. Crowfut was a surprise for which he had not been at all prepared. He did not attempt to combat her resolution, or even frame an excuse.

"I'll see yew later," he said to Mr. Crowfut, with a bow; and motioning to the boy of the limber leg he led the way out of the office, leaving the proprietor unable to tell whether anything he had said had been in serious earnest, but inclined to believe that it was all a rough joke on the part of the long-visaged man. If not, what was the meaning of this duplicate daughter, and why was she also brought to him? He scarcely heard the voice of his wife, demanding to know who that man was, and what nonsense it was that he had been gabbling.

A sharp, "Eh?" recalled him to his duty, and he tried to frame an explanation that would not give him away in regard to the young lady who was standing there regarding them both with an amused look on her handsome young face.

"The idea of that man taking my house for a hotel, or what was worse, just an ordinary boarding-house! Did it as coolly as if I had to work my fingers to the bone for dollars and cents! I've seen some rough times in my life, and I have followed Ebenezer faithful and true through thick and thin, but I never got down to taking boarders, and I hope I never shall. I haven't too good an opinion of human nature as it is, and by the time I had a gang around me for a week I wouldn't have any faith at all left, in that or anything else. It was a blessed thing I was here. I saw it in his eye. Crowfut was just going to say yes again, when he saw me. He had said yes and no doubt he meant it. But with his wife before him he couldn't well help remembering her, and so, as a second thought, and to save his crazy old head, he must talk about consulting her. And a man would have said, no, and kicked him out for the impudence. Come, Ebenezer, what have you to say for yourself?"

For an instant Ebenezer was tempted to tell his wife the whole story, and see what she made of it. She could understand, then, the meaning of the words she had heard him utter.

Second thought came to his aid, however. He remembered that when Mrs. Crowfut was in a mood like the one that possessed her now, common sense and reason were alike thrown away on her. He might succeed in turning her away from Laura; but that was all the good he could do by opening his soul. Hence, Ebenezer was silent.

Amariah chuckled softly to himself as the two went away from the office. He had wisely refrained from saying anything to Mrs. Crowfut, and so escaped without hearing the loud opinion that she would have been willing to give concerning his proposition; but he could very well imagine it, and it afforded him a great deal of amusement. When they were out of earshot of the building he laughed a little louder as he spoke to Fred.

"I reckon thar's a pair ov 'em at it, hammer an' tongs—ef Ebenezer ain't tew astonished tew take his own part. It's fun amazin' jest tew guess what he's thinkin' ov, an' how he's tryin' tew straighten out ther hank. Ther darter ov Simon Sanford! Wal, now, he must think ther woods are full of Simon's relations, and all ov

'em a-steerin' fur Ebenezer Crowfut's. But ef I didn't put a extry spoke in Jarve Jackson's wheel I'm mighty much out. Guess we'll strike out for camp, now. I don't keer tew stay away too long while ther's sick men ez Hank Darby skootin' round on ther outside ov ther clearin'."

"Guess Fan could take keer ov herself," answered Fred, as though a question had been addressed to him.

"An' with Dandy ter help her I sh'd say she'd make it mighty lively fur anything less than a gang. An' it's that same gang that tried ter make a strike last night, that I'd be afeard ov, if I war tryin' ter borry trouble."

"Never mind that gang. It didn't amount ter much anyhow; an' it's got other fish tew fry afore now. I opine that they begun tew run ez soon ez they got out ov sight, an' ain't done goin' yit. Mighty frisky fellers be those same lambs, but they's allers willin' ter frisk outen ther way ov danger when they think it's around."

"Couldn't tell a feller suthin' 'bout them lambs, mebbe? Kinder seems ter me they's a interestin' lot, an' ther' might 'a' bin money in 'em ef we'd 'a' held on ter 'em when we hed 'em. Say, Mr. Holdfast, why didn't yer think ov that? Ef they's part ov ther gang ov road-agents ez hez bin playin' smash round these regions, I've heared ther' were a big reward fur 'em, dead er alive. Wot were ther matter with you an' me rakin' it in?"

"The matter ov blood on it. I want tew do my killin' on my own account, er not at all. An' ef we'd 'a' hung in tew 'em, I reckon they would 'a' got away all ther same. Yew see, they hed pards in ther bushes, that wouldn't shoot tell they hed tew on account ov ther girl; but sooner than see the'r pards run in they would massaker haff a dozen girls, an' make not more ner two bites apiece on us."

"Oh, bosh! How could they hev hit ther gal without ther chance ov hittin' the'r pards, same ez us? Amariah, I'm afeard ye'r playin' a deep game; an' it behoves yer ter open out, clean down ter bed-rock. Then mebbe I kin offer some sorter a suggestion."

"Small boys want ter be seen an' not heard. Yew kin tumble tew a charm; but when yew try ter take road-agents I sh'd think yew war clean off yer base. Better put a button on yewr lips an' let me do ther thinkin'."

"That 'pends suthin' on yer hevin' ther brains ter do it with. Ef I were sure ov them I'd not he chinnin'."

"Yew hush! We're gittin' nigh ter camp, an' yew dunno who may be a-prowlin' round. I ain't ready tew give any points away tell I'm outen danger. Ef I could ketch 'em, it might make things a heap easier."

"All right. I'm dumb ez a clam. It won't be long I'll hev ter hold in, fur Fan likes talk ez well ez ther next one."

Amariah made no audible answer, but gave an impatient wave of his hand, that enjoined silence with a good deal more force than if he had shouted ever so loud. Limberleg remained quiet, and the two approached the spot where the wagon was almost hidden in the dense thicket of bushes which Amariah had selected as his camping-ground.

No signs of the "lambs" there. There was utter silence instead.

In fact, the silence was too intense. Fred looked around him with an anxious glance. Fan ought to be stepping out to meet them, but somehow he did not look for her. Something was telling him that she was not there. When Amariah stepped into the wagon Fred followed him with serious eyes, and waited to hear the very words that floated sadly out to him a moment later.

"By ginger, Limberleg, ther gal's not tew hum!"

Neither man nor boy was of the excitable kind; and at this announcement Fred felt a great deal less like talking than he had done before. He stepped hurriedly forward, and peered into the ambulance.

There was nothing there that looked as though there had been visitors during their absence, and there was no trace of anything like a struggle in the neighborhood of the wagon. Perhaps there was nothing wrong after all. He turned away his head, and called softly:

"Fan! I say, Fan!"

There was no answer.

Then Fred slowly made a circuit of the spot, looking narrowly at the ground, in search of any footprints, or traces that might show what had happened. If Fan was not in the neighborhood of the wagon it was certain that something had happened. Fred remembered the last thing Amariah said to her on leaving. She was not

to go away from the ambulance; and was to keep Dandy within hearing. In fact, after that, Holdfast had chained the bear under the wagon, and if he was now gone there must be a reason for it.

"Peers ter me ther lambs may hev bin round after all. What you make out ov it, Amariah? Yer wants ter talk quick, fur ef ther ain't a explanashun most mighty sudden yer Uncle Ezra will perceeed ter begin ter git ready ter go on ther trail. He's a boss when it comes ter playin' red Injun. I ain't sayin' more ner ther law allows ter make yer feel bad, but ef I'd bin so keerless, knowin' how ther land lay, I'd be a-kickin' myself frum here ter way-back fur doin' ov it. You said it were all right, an' I were a-trustin' ov yer, 'cos I thort you knewed ther ropes an' it wa'n't my say-so; but you kin bet yer bottom dollar that I ain't trustin' nobody ag'in when Fairy Fred's around. Talk up, man! Wot yer got ter say fur yerself? Ef you can't take keer ov a girl like Fan better, she wants a new g'ardeen; an' when I gits my han's on her—w'ich in course I will—she'll hev it; an' it'll be Fairy Fred."

"Ef talkin' will do ary good, I sh'd say no doubt yew will git thar with both feet; but it ain't so easy tew see how talk's goin' tew do good in this case. I kin only say I thought I hed it all safe. Mebbe Fan wandered away. She's one ov the wanderin' kind—monstr'us strange how that gal will wander sometimes—an' may be back while we's a-talkin' 'bout her."

"Not much, Amariah. Ef I war in ther guess bizziness ez big ez I be sumtimes, I'd say that yer wa'n't half ez sorry fur this ez I be; an' ef yer made me fightin' mad I'd say that yer left her here pu'pus ter be took. Ef yer don't like that—we both hev weepins, an' yer kin pull ez quick ez yer wants to. Fairy Fred's ready fur you."

There was an honest indignation in the tone of the boy that told how much in earnest he was in his charge; and he looked more angry than ever when Amariah, for answer, burst into a fit of laughter, that was none the less hearty because it was done under his breath, so to speak.

"I might 'a' knowned ther' war no flies on Little Limberleg! I don't say yew'r right er wrong; but ef ther right party hev got her, it's ther best thing fur both ov us."

CHAPTER X. THE FRISKY "LAMBS."

FROM what has already been said concerning Miss Fanny it has probably struck the reader that she was not a young lady given to nerves, and that she would not be at all afraid to be left by herself for a few hours, when she had Dandy and her revolvers for her protection. She waved her hand to Fred, as the boy looked back over his shoulder, and watched the two depart with a smile on her lips.

When they were out of sight her first move was to loosen Dandy, and call him out from under the wagon.

"Much good you would do me there, sir," she said, patting him gently on the head.

"I would have to crawl under the wagon after you, and by the time I got you loose it would be too late. We'll put you in position now, and then you will be all ready for any prowlers that may come around. There! That will do better. Lie down, sir, and stay till you are called for. I hope that I will not need your services, but if I do you will be on hand."

Dandy sniffed around lazily, and threw himself down on the spot pointed at, which was behind the nearest tuft of bushes, where he would be near to the wagon, but screened from the view of any one approaching the camp by the regular route.

Having begun in this manner it is no wondering matter that Amariah's injunctions were otherwise and totally disregarded. With Dandy to watch it the wagon would be safe from any prying intruders; or else they would have to make enough noise disposing of the bear to call her to the spot. Without any apparent thought of danger to herself, Fanny strolled away, looking from this side to that, as if greatly interested in noting what sort of a region they had reached.

Everything was lonely enough to suit the greatest eremite in the world. As far as could be seen there had been no one near for ages. The turf that was scattered here and there among the trees and bushes showed the marks of no footsteps of either man or beast, and save for an occasional bird that fluttered by in the tamest way imaginable she saw no signs of any living thing.

Very aimlessly did she wander, or seem to;

but she completed the circuit of the camp before striking off at a tangent; and unless her keen eyes had been deceived there had been no one but themselves in the neighborhood for some time.

The course that she finally took led her over something like a natural path, along the crest of a long roll in the ground. When she had followed it for half a mile, or something less, she found herself on the bank of a small stream. The water was clear, and though shallow it was pretty to look at. She sat down with her hands in her lap and gazed at the water. It was a pleasant place, early in the morning, before the heat of the sun had penetrated to the spot, and it was the most natural thing in the world that she should linger there after once having courage to reach it.

After a while the low murmur of the stream as it went over a little ripple of sand and gravel appeared to act as an opiate. She settled into a more comfortable position, her head drooped forward, her eyes closed, and a listener could have heard the low, long breathing of the sleeper.

For ten minutes or so there were no other sounds to be heard, and her rest was unbroken. Then there was an intruder. A man crept silently around the nearest clump at her back, and with his eyes fixed steadily on her, approached with crouching, stealthy steps.

His presence remained unnoticed. If Dandy had been there no doubt he would have given her timely warning; and the man evidently expected something of the kind, for, from time to time, his eyes wandered away a trifle, while he explored the surroundings, to make certain that she was alone. He even loosened his revolver that was in his belt, a thing he would scarcely have taken time to do if he had not had a suspicion that she might not be as entirely alone as she seemed.

Finally, his hand dropped on her shoulder, in a grasp that when it tightened a trifle more would hold her helpless. For the present it was firm but did not hurt.

At that her eyes opened, and she tried to arise, a loud cry coming from between her lips.

Instantly the other hand of the man passed over her lips, while he spoke in a low, gruff tone:

"Not a word, purty; not a word. There won't be a mite ov harm done yer, bless yer purty face, ef yer only lis'sens ter reason. I don't want ter be rough; an' ef yer gives me ther wink that you'll be reas'n'ble I'll take my paw off yer trap an' give yer a chance ter breath' twice afore yer talks once. But don't yer go ter open yer mouth fur a yell. There ain't no show fur nobody ter hear yer, but I'd shut off ther wind, hard, on jin'ral princerpals. Now, is yer goin' ter be a good gal, er hev I got ter make yer one? You oughter see how it are yerself."

Miss Fanny, after that first expression of alarm, was not as frightened as the fellow expected to find her, and when his hand loosened a little from her mouth she quietly drew her lips away from his paw.

"If you please, don't be violent. I know very well that I am alone, and that if I cried ever so much it would not bring any one to my aid. All I can do is to listen to what you have to say; and the less trouble I give, no doubt the better it will be. What do you want?"

"They sed you was a gal ov sense, an' now I'll swear to it. Ov course I ain't alone, an' ef ary one did come it would be ther wuss fur 'em when they struck my pals in ther bushes. Ther hull, dismal fact are that ye'r wanted. Ef it war my say-so I wouldn't bother yer a blessed minnit, but yer wanted bad, ez yer must hev guessed long afore this. I don't think ther's ther least danger ov ary harm, an' mebbe ther will be a heap ov profit in it, so I'd jest advise yer ter come along without worry. It can't be no wuss than draggin' round ther country in a cart along with a ragged ole lunatik an' a bear what may eat yer up ary moment; an' ef I ain't mistook ther biggest, it'll be a heap sight better. I've knowed a leetle gal like you when she went away, ez come back in silks an' di'mun's. Jest remember that, an' come along."

"I don't want any silks and diamonds, and I would sooner be with Dandy and my father than with any one or anything else in the world. But if I must go, I will. Only remember that I am going back to them as soon as I can; and that they will be looking for me. If they find you with me, they may be angry enough to do you serious harm. Amariah can be very cruel when any one interferes with me; and Dandy would eat you up if I gave the word. Better let me go. Or, if you daren't let me go,

then, perhaps, by and by, you could slip away and tell where I am. Then he would be your friend, and give you very much more than the other man. I am ready now. Go as you please."

Fanny spoke after a style that was almost infantile. As she was also dressed for the part, it appeared to be all in good faith, and the man looked at her after a puzzled fashion.

"Well, ef you ain't a cool one! Blessed ef I don't feel like bein' yer friend, anyhow. Ef I thort ary one war goin' ter do yer harm, I'd turn yer loose an' die a-shoutin'. I jest would do that, honey. But it'll be all right, an' you ever so much better off than traipsin' the camps in that ole wagon. Come with me. I'm goin' ter treat yer well, an' don't yer furgit it."

He spoke with a heartiness that was partially reassuring, and though he shifted his grasp from her shoulder to her hand, which he held so that there was no danger of her breaking away by a sudden effort, he was careful that the clasp of his rough paw should not hurt her, and she was guided rather than led away from the unlucky spot she had chosen for her meditations.

The fellow was a stranger, or he might not have been so easily deceived. Fanny was not only older, but she was wiser than she looked, and it was her plan to throw the man entirely off his guard. She succeeded so well that he never noticed, nor suspected that she had left behind something to attract the attention of Amariah when he came thither in search of her. She was really wiser than he, because, when she saw that his course led along the bank of the stream, she expected him to take to the water, and thus leave it uncertain which way he had gone from the spot.

But he had no fear of immediate pursuit, and was in no haste. For a mile or more he picked his way along what was nowhere a very uneven trail, until he came to the mouth of a small gorge. Here he halted and gave a low whistle.

The signal was answered immediately by the same sound, twice repeated, and then Fan's captor whistled once more, in a peculiar manner. At once there was a sound of horses' feet, up the gulch, and then another man appeared, riding one horse, and leading two by the bridles.

"Come at last, hev yer?" said this man, as he rode up to the two.

"Got ther kid, too. Glad ter see it. Begun ter b'leve it war goin' ter be a water haul. Climb in. It's time ter be goin', an' it ain't no small ride we've got ter make afore sundown. Tell that time I won't feel sure my neck's safe on my shoulders. Thar's double chances, an' both ov 'em ag'in' us."

"Tell me su'thin' I don't know," growled the first man, as he swung Fanny on the back of one of the horses.

"An' now, little gal, jest 'member w'ot I bin a-tellin' ov yer, an' don't try ter make trouble. I know yer kin ride, 'cause I've see'd yer at it. Ef yer tries ter git away, Tom, here, kin swing a lan' rope, fur all that's out; an' I kin stop a hoss ef it kills hoss an' rider. Here we go; an' you see that you keeps betwixt us two till fur orders."

"An' yer ain't goin' ter rope her on?" asked Tom, with disgust in his tone. "She'll be a comin' slip-jack on us afore we've gone a mil'."

"Did ther captain make me ther boss—er you—ov this outfit? She's a gal ov sense, an' ain't goin' to give her frien's ary trouble, when they's tryin' to be good to her. You lead off, an' I'll keep my eyes on her. I'll bet she follers like a darlin'."

With a grunt the other led the way, and Fanny, who was much surprised at the confidence that was being bestowed upon her, spoke to her horse, gathered up the reins, and followed with as little exhibition of feeling as though she had been the companion of these ruffians all her life.

The way led through retired places, and secret spots. Here and there turns and doubling were made at points where their footsteps left no marks. While they journeyed at their leisure, they were wary all the time. It would puzzle a good trailer to follow them, unless he knew the point for which they were aiming—and that was something that neither Amariah nor Fanny had any knowledge of.

Still, the only sign of nervousness that the girl gave was in occasionally glancing backward. When she did that the man in the rear smiled grimly, but said nothing. As long as her glances fell upon no one but himself she was welcome to look.

They made one halt, that lasted for several hours. In that time they had a cold dinner,

and the horses a rest, in addition to what they could pick up to eat, and the long drink they took from the spring that seemed to have had no other visitor since the times to which the memory of man ran not back. When they started again they all felt the better for the rest, and the pace was faster than it had been. They crossed a lonely plain, now; and at length, just as night fell, entered a defile that led into the heart of a desolate chain of hills. And as yet there were no signs of any pursuit, nor any indications of their destination.

CHAPTER XI.

AMARIAH BEGINS TO SHOW SENSE.

FAIRY FRED had a little body, but his heart was large. For a moment he was sorely tempted to use the revolver that he was so free to mention. The remembrance that Holdfast was a man of resources, and would hardly be taken off his guard, had nothing to do with his refraining from expressing his indignation in that forcible manner. But it had never seemed that Amariah was a bad-hearted sort of a fellow, or one that would do a mean action and then glory in it. If Holdfast had been silent, or even angry, Fred's suspicions would have speedily ripened into certainties. At that laugh, and the strange declaration that followed it, though Limberleg was at first angered it was only for a moment. Then he began to think that there was a mystery behind this, and he choked down his wrath, and spoke in a more friendly tone.

"Reck'n you knows best what's what; an' ef yer comes up ter ther scratch I kin foller, yit. But yer don't want ter waste too much time a-laffin'. What I wants ter know is, w'ot ye'r goin' in' ter do?"

"That's all right, Freddy. I'm a-goin' tew foller, tew see whar she goes tew. Ef yew be a good boy yew kin come tew. But re-comember, it's not funny whar I spect tew go. Thar kin be no backin' eout ef yew start onto the trip. An' ef yew try tew buck I shell jest leave yew alone tew starve, er die ez ther fates may d'rect. Air yew with me cl'ar threw, er not? Yew kin take my hand er leave it alone jest ez you please. Ef yew do yew want tew foller me, an' not say another word."

"Good ernuf, Azariah. Ef yew talk that way I kin see that ther's ter be more fun than yer wants ter let on, an' ez long ez it's fur Fan's sake yer kin count me in. But when it's a choice 'twixt Amariah an' Fan I'll stay with ther gal. Now, ef yer wants ter take me ez a para on them figgers here's me hand fur ninety days on-loss otherwise descharged."

The boy held out his hand as he spoke; and Azariah grasped it without any qualifying speeches. The two, who seemed to have come together so entirely by chance, and to be so strangely assorted, could join in the search for Fan with perfect confidence in the good intentions of each other.

There was very little to say after that. Amariah looked over the inside of the wagon for a minute or two, arranging a few things for an absence. Then he wrote a short note, which he folded and tacked to the door. It merely said:

"Fan has bin taken, and I am on the trail. Ef I am not here ter-night move things."

"Yew see," he said, to Fred, who was eying the operation of posting the notice with an inquisitive look. "Sich things ez these waz liable tew happen, an' I have arranged according. Some one will be out frum town tew-night ef he don't bear frum me, an' onless ther Lambs meddles with things afore he comes, which I don't think they will, he will see 'em put whar they will be safe tell we git back. Now, I'm ready be yew?"

The boy laughed and waved his hand. The bundle was safe in the ambulance, and the rest of his belongings he had on his person. He was always ready.

"Then keep yewr eyes on me, but stand still tell I give yew leave. I must look around a bit tell I'm sure ov ther trail."

The boy had failed to find the track where Fanny had left the wagon, but Amariah had little trouble. Perhaps it had been noted before, and he only had to verify his belief. At any rate he soon gave the signal, and with Fred following cautiously he led the way without the least hesitation along the ground over which Fanny had passed an hour or so before.

Here and there the boy himself could see where her light footsteps had fallen and when they came to the bank of the stream he saw at once where she had been sitting, and the mark left by a man who had evidently been at the same spot.

Of course there were no evidences of a struggle, nor any indications that the girl had received harm. To Fred this was a satisfaction; and he seemed to think that Amariah would at once follow on the plainly marked trail.

But Holdfast was in no hurry. Though the footprints of the two were so clearly to be seen he looked elsewhere also. He made a circuit of the spot, in so doing discovering the tracks made by the fellow as he approached the girl. He considered a little, carefully noting this track, as if to be sure of knowing it if he saw it again, and finally turned to Fred.

"This air going tew be a longish job, an' one we hed better undertake on hossback. Ef yew don't be tew brash yew might foller on slow until yew come tew a puzzle, an' I'll go back fur the ponies. When yew can't find w'ich ways ther track goes, stand still. I'll be along shortly an' help yew out. Things seem ter be a workin' bout right, but we cain't tell yit. Along about sundown we'll know more, ef not sooner."

"But it ain't no time sence they left here. They're a-walkin'; what's ther matter with our runnin'? Ef we don't lose time we kin ketch 'em on foot," argued Fred.

"An' it wa'n't no time afore they crawled inter saddles. It don't pay nohow, ter send a boy ter mill. Run along, an' ef yew ketch 'em give 'em thunder an' lightnin', but don't try ter fool Amariah. He knows sign when he sees it ez well ez ther next."

Amariah had the best of the argument, such as it was, and went back for the horses, while Fred hurried along on the trail, which soon disappeared from even his keen eyes, and he had quite a search before he found it again. By that time Amariah was close behind him.

Once in the saddle and Fred had hopes of going on at a great rate. Instead of that their progress was more cautious, and more slow than ever. Amariah approached the little gulch with the caution of an Indian who feared an ambuscade. Evidently he was not a reckless man, nor was he one who overlooked the fact that his life was sought as well as the liberty of Fanny.

Once more the traces were distinct; and this time it was evident that there was more than one man engaged in the affair. Amariah went back to where the horses had been hidden, and looked over the ground. He took so much time to it that Fred began to be impatient, and expressed his independent opinion after his free and easy way.

"Don't hurry me, Freddy. I want tew see ef I can find out who was onto ther racket. I'll know better, then, how hard we will hev tew chase 'em. Ther's a heap in knowin' beforehand what sorter work air cut out fur yew. It saves hoss-flesh, an' ther wear an' tear ov swearin' when ther chainte air over, an' ther fun lost."

Finally, however, he was satisfied that there was no more to be learned at that place, and the actual business of the chase began.

More than once was time lost during the day, in searching for the trail that dropped out of sight with mysterious suddenness. Before very long Fred was compelled to admit that if he had been alone he would never have been able to follow it. Sometimes Amariah searched for the tracks until they were found; again he allowed his instincts to direct him, and after a careful look around, to get the lay of the land, would strike off in a bee-line for some point ahead, where he again struck the trail. In this latter way he made up some of the lost time; but it was not hard to guess that they were not traveling as fast as the fugitives. Fred seemed almost wild over the idea that they were losing ground, and more than once urged more haste.

"Don't be glim-flashy, youngster," was Amariah's sedate answer.

"We air makin' ontirely tew good time as it air; an' I'm only afraid ther good luck will play out. We kin only dew our best, an' that's w'ot we air dewin' now. Ef yew think diff'rent go ahead, but I won't agree ter hunt up yer corps fur tew be decently buried. When we git back yew tell ef Amariah war right."

When they came to the spot where the lengthy halt was made, the signs were so plain that Limberleg felt encouraged. The fugitives had lost so much time there that they could not be more than an hour or so ahead, and the boy expected that Holdfast would push on at once.

Nothing of the kind was done. On the contrary, Amariah followed suit and unsaddled his horses. He did not take the time that those in advance had done, but man, boy and beasts had the chance to recruit themselves, and when they started again on the chase the advantage was easily seen.

And yet Amariah had not ridden for an hour when he once more halted.

They were at the edge of the plain, and could see the mountain chain beyond. There was no question about the trail just then, and the road before them was almost as level as a floor. Fred could not understand such caution.

"It's this ways, bub. Yew know, an' so dew I, that ther's a gang t'et would like tew take me in—an' ther couldn't be a better place in all outer doors. They kin see us fur miles, an' ef they expect us to tew come boomin' along on ther trail, ez ov course they dew, w'ot's tew hinder from droppin' a man er tew back tew lay low, an' when we come in range tew shoot plumb center? Mebbe it would be best tew lay back tell dark afore we cross ther plain. We can't miss 'em in ther dark; an' ef we traveled a couple hours after sundown it would bring us nigh tew where they will make their camp tew-night. In the morning we would be right in town, an' all dressed up."

"But s'posin' they don't make no camp tew-night? Whar, oh, whar would we be in ther mornin'? An' s'posin' this ain't that gang, at all. Yer sed that ther Lambs were off ther track, an' yer wa'n't afraid ov them botherin' yer camp. W'ot's got inter you ter be so skeery, anyhow?"

"I ain't skeery; but I don't want ter make no mistakes at this stage ov ther game. I ain't afraid ov ther campin' somwhar's in them hills, 'cause I know they got tew, unless they turns 'round an' takes ther back track. This air about ther only outlet, an' on ther other side air ther sands ov ther desert. Unless they's a heap better than ther averidge, they can't travel furder than ther rest ov folks without grass an' water; an' they ain't sich fools ez tew try tew cross."

"Ah!" answered Fred.

"Have it ter suit yerself. You seems ter know ther lay-out better than ther man that made it. When we git back inebbee I'll hev su'thin' ter say ter you; but jest now you kin hev yer chance, and I'll do ther thinkin' ez we go along."

It was a little strange how the two stuck together when they were all the time differing so in regard to the course to be pursued, and the boy was so free to express his doubts and suspicions. Amariah was the very essence of good humor all the time, but that could hardly account for the desire that he seemed to have for the boy's company.

Fred did not overlook this; but was inclined to think that any company on what might be a desperate undertaking would be better than none, and that Amariah had no particular admiration or love for him, and might quietly drop him out of sight when the opportunity came and he was needed no longer.

What he had said appeared to gradually have more effect. Amariah was silent for a little, and spent his time looking out over the plain before them. When something like fifteen minutes had passed, he reorganized his plans.

"It's more reesky, Limberleg; but seein' yew air bent on it, mebbe we kin make ther rifle. Ef I could git 'em tew b'leve that we hed bin throwed off the track, it would suit tew a charm; but ef they see us, like ez not it won't make much differens' in ther long run. We'll git on ahead, though I'm still a-thinkin' that ther time frum now till night wouldn't be lost ef we waited here. We've got ter stop when the dark comes down."

"That's dependin'," said Fred, as he climbed once more into the saddle.

"Ef we kin find ther trail, we'll foller it, I reckon; an' it's no use ter borry trouble 'bout it till ther time comes. Here goes."

Again they were on the way, following the track of the fugitives at a rapid rate. If Amariah had more for a guide than the hoof-marks that the boy could see for himself, he said nothing of it; and Fred had so far seen nothing of the little signs that Fanny had tried to leave behind her to aid in the pursuit.

Of course the darkness came down before they had reached the pass in the mountains for which they were aiming, but now they made no halt, since it was almost certain that they could not miss the way. Even when they plunged into the gloomy defile, the pace was kept up until far into the night. When Amariah drew rein again the boy was glad enough to slide to the ground and take a little of the rest that he began to need so badly.

Once stretched on the ground, Fred's eyes closed without his being aware of it. He slept soundly, and there was nothing to disturb his slumbers. When he awoke again, with a yawn, the sun was shining and he was alone in the desert fastness. Amariah had vanished, and so had the horses. His saddle was, fortunately,

under his head, and the haversack that was strapped to it contained a scant supply of food. He still had his revolver; but, altogether, he was a very lonely boy, who found himself in a bad predicament. He would not go back, and it might be death to remain there or go ahead.

CHAPTER XII.

"WHO HAS THE GIRL?"

THERE are mysteries enough in the world, as it is; but if the facts as they might seem were always known there would be more of them. There was a large-sized one at Hard Pan, though few took note of it, and so far only saw one side of it. Just about the time that Fairy Fred and his elder companion were starting in to cross the plain that stretched between them and the mountain defile beyond, the loungers at the Hive were delighted at seeing a wagon, drawn by two horses and under the guidance of a man who looked very familiar, enter the town. The wagon was a covered one, somewhat resembling an ambulance, and on the front seat was Amariah Holdfast himself—or his Double. There certainly could be no mistaking that peculiar countenance, those long, flaxen locks, or the mildly curious gaze with which he looked about him. To make assurance doubly sure, there was the bear.

Dandy was stalking along at the rear of the wagon, and languidly viewing the town, casting his glances from side to side, as though neither the place nor the people were strange to him. Straight to the Hive went the wagon, and Harry Harper, who stood in the doorway, greeted the arrival with his pleasantest smile.

"Good for you, old man! Thought you would be coming our way again, if the racket last night hadn't scared you out of the district. Drive into the yard, and lariat your team behind the shed. We will look out for you better since we begin to understand the game they tried to set up on you."

The invitation was accepted with a solemn nod, and the vehicle turned to take up the position indicated. Harry stepped out of the doorway, and followed around the building. When he saw that the wagon held no other occupant his surprise and concern were plain enough.

"Hello! How's this? Where's the rest of your party? Nothing wrong I hope."

"A heap wrong; an' Amariah Holdfast be all broke up. While I were tew town this mornin' them skipjacks got in ther work. Ther gal's gone, ther boy's gone; an' ther's nobody left but Amariah an' ther bear. They stole ther gal, an' little Limberleg hez gone in chase. I war doin' ther same tell I see'd it war no use; an' I come tew Hard Pan tew look fur news. Hev yew heared anything ov that gang, or pore, leetle Fanny!"

"Nary thing, Mr. Holdfast. But we did hear that those fellows that were after you last night were frauds of the first water, and that they skipped out ahead of half a dozen deputy sheriffs, who got there just too late to make the haul. It seems they have been in the bushes, waiting for their chance at the Lambs; and missed it by less than no time. Perhaps they will get your girl for you. If they don't, say the word, and every man that has the Hive for headquarters will turn out on the search. Come right in and brace up."

"Thanks; but afore this thing gits jinerally known, jest a word with yew. Kin we talk whar all Hard Pan can't hear us?"

"Certainly, certainly," answered Harry as he led the way to his room. There were two witnesses to the conversation, so far as it had gone, who were not visible. In a shanty just opposite the Hive, Nestor Northrup, and Thompson, of the Lambs, were having a conference. A noise upon the street caused them to take a peep through the grimy little window at the front, and they had a view of the arrival, which was as much of a surprise to them as it had been to Harper.

"Heavens! There has been a hitch somewhere!" was the exclamation of Northrup, as he recognized the face of Amariah.

"He would never come here without the girl—he would sooner die, on the trail. I'd give a hundred to know what he is telling Harper."

"Save that and it will be twice that earned. What's the matter with going over to find out? No one else knows you; and he won't squeal. He dares not."

"If you please, I would rather not. The way things are developing I am not so sure what he would dare to do. He may be tired of playing hide-and-seek, and ready to have all the old accounts opened. We have got the hounds out of the way, on the trail of the Simon-pure Lambs; there is no use in running any risks by showing what might seem a better and a fresher

trail to follow. We will take it for granted that he is going to try to get some one else to take up the trail that he dares not follow himself. If I had not been fool enough to show myself when I thought that I had him foul I would not have to be so cautious now. While the hounds are playing away their time on the fellows that he was fool enough to turn loose I might be getting in my work. Now, I don't see that it will be safe to move until we have boosted him over the range."

"And who is going to carry out that little part of the programme? You had him at your mercy, down in his camp, but you were too awful anxious to have a whole gang at your back, and work the thing up by moonlight, with the rest of that romantic nonsense. If you had held low and pulled a trigger he would have been out of the damp, and the girl safe enough in our hands. If he got away with half a dozen of us, what chance do you expect to have when there is no one but you alone in the swim?"

"Oh, come now, you are mixing things all to here and come back again. It was because I knew him so well that I didn't care to try him alone. If you had brought the Lambs along with you we might have gone back and settled it perhaps; but as it was I preferred what I thought a certainty. Now, it's a desperate case, and the risks must be run. Until I satisfied myself that the girl with him was really the right one it would have been fool's work to have chipped in; and it did not seem safe to let him get into Hard Pan if it could be helped. I suspected then that there were others ready to take a hand in the game."

"And now you know it. Just who it is that is running things from the other side is what I would like to know. Supposing it should be Sanford himself?"

"Don't take up with any such fool's notion. Simon Sanford is dead enough, and I'm not afraid that his ghost will rise up to take an interest in the affair. The best guess that I can make is that it is some one who has struck the trail of Cyrus Dawling, and wants to take him in on the old account. The money is still up for the taking of him."

"And why not help them along? That would get him out of our road, and no questions asked."

"Because it is not so sure that the fool might not prove his innocence after all, and get loose in time to say checkmate. No, we must run it as we laid it out; and at the same time find out who is the other party that is trying to slip 'in an oar'."

"And by that time find that we are a shade too late and our cake all dough. It's a big pile of money to play for; but the risks begin to look considerably bigger, and we are not going to have the game to ourselves. All right, though. I've risked my life every month of the year on chances that couldn't turn out half so big as this may, and it's not likeiy that I will show the white feather now. If we have the girl, as I suppose we have, there is that much as a starter; and the rest will follow."

"We should hear from Evans to-night in regard to the girl—though the coming to town of Dawling alone tells the story plainly enough. We will dispose of Cyrus to-night in some way. To-morrow the balance of the work can be done here, and then this region will know us no more. And if there are any inquisitive souls who want to look for us in a month from now they can hunt and welcome. Keep yourself hidden until dark, for there may be some one here who can tell you in any disguise. After that the performances will begin, and Amariah Holdfast had better look out for his necktie."

Although there was a chance that he might be seen by Dawling, Northrup did not believe that under his present disguise he would be recognized, and very boldly made his exit by the front door. He looked calmly up and down the street, and then walked slowly away, with a lounging gait that was totally unlike his usual rapid step.

On the other side of the town was a saloon known as the Gem, where various bad men had their headquarters. Toward this Nestor bent his steps, and entered without meeting any one who cared to speak with him. At the bar he halted a moment.

"Any one asking for me?" he queried.

"No one up to the present time," was the answer; and after having disposed of a glass of "poison" he passed on to a little room in the rear of the building, after the manner of a man who was well acquainted with the ins and outs of the place.

He found himself alone there, and throwing himself down on a rough bunk closed his eyes.

In a short time he was sound asleep, and was only aroused by the entrance of a man, who stumbled heavily into the room, through a side door, the key to which he held in his hand.

At the sound of the footsteps on the floor Northrup came to his feet with a bound, a revolver in his hand; though, before he had the weapon poised, he recognized his man.

"You, Evans! What brings you here?"

"This!" retorted Evans, throwing back his coat, and showing a bandage across his breast, from under which the blood had soaked, splotching the grimy shirt below with a great, dark stain.

"Some one that can sling an arrow where he wants it, laid for us in the bushes, and when we were thinking the chance had come to get in our work he did for us both. Ben is in a worse fix than I am; and you can bet your life I would not have been here if I hadn't thought it the square thing to carry the news if I died doing it. You will have to get some other men for the work; Ben and I are laid out for a month."

A hearty curse fell from Northrup's lips, while he stared at the man as if unable to entirely understand his intelligence.

"Before you got the girl? Where, then, has she gone to? Curses on it! If we had not been so busy getting the goods out of sight, for fear they might fall into the hands of the hounds, I would have known why the racket failed, even if I missed the shot. Yet let him getaway with you? Is that your say-so?"

"If you want it that way. The old coon has managed to hold over pretty good men before this; I don't know that we ought to be so much ashamed if his cards were too big for us. But I don't think it was the man with the bear that did the trick. He hadn't time to get out of town. It was more like Injun work. There ain't many white men that can send an arrow a hundred yards and make it go through flesh and bone like this chap did; and follow it with another before the first one got to its mark. We were to scout around, and if we saw our chance sail in. We thought we saw it, and was laying out to act accordingly. Then—we didn't think about seeing anything, much, for a while. I was afraid you would think that we had made the rifle, and perhaps act accordingly, or I never would have risked my life crawling in. Now, send out for Pete. This thing may be worse than it looks, and a new bandage on it will feel safer. There's a chunk of a rib missing, but I don't think it carried any of the vitals along with it."

"I'll send him in, and see that you are cared for in the best of shapes. I reckon you did all that you could. But I would give a thousand to know who has the girl."

CHAPTER XIII.

MORE UNPLEASANTNESS.

"WELL, it serves my mother's only darlin' about right," was what Fred said to himself, as he raised himself on his tip-toes to look around.

"I had fair warnin' what sort of a hairpin he was, and went to sleep while he was doin' ther watchin'. I reckon he got tired, an' went where he thought it didn't need a feller ter keep his eyes quite so wide open. Now, what's left in ther box fur Fairy Frederick? I know I haven't ther ghost ov an idear where I be, an' it's a thunderin' long ways ter water."

From the moment his eyes had rested on the spot where the horses had been the night before, and where they certainly were not now, the boy had felt sure that he was deserted; and that if he wanted to get safely out of the fix he was in, he would have to paddle his own canoe with all the vigor that was in him. Otherwise, it was not likely that Amariah would have left the spot, however temporarily, without awakening him; and the absence of both horses was a certificate that he had no notion of coming back. The spirits of the boy rose to the occasion, however; and he uttered no great moan over his uncomfortable and dangerous position. He was not at all sure that he would give up the pursuit; and to strengthen himself for whatever tasks might be before him, he first and foremost made a sparing breakfast out of the materials at hand. Then he threw the haversack over his shoulder, placed the saddle behind a rock, where it would not attract attention in case any of the men of whom he was in pursuit should happen that way again, and turned his attention to the trails that he hoped to find.

The course the night before had been to the south, and southward he now started. It was not hard to follow the trail that lay there, and for an hour or more Fred plodded along. He was just in the unamiable mood to stick dogged-

ly to whatever he began on and despise the most ordinary precautions. To be sure, as far as he could see, the road, if road it could be called, seemed to stretch out interminably before him; and if he had not seen anything of the kidnappers at the beginning, it was scarcely likely that he would meet them before reaching the other end. He thought of danger, now and then; but it was not of the present. His eyes explored the ground in front, and he took it for granted that his flanks were protected by the walls of the defile, that for the most part were not far apart, and arose like the sides of a canyon.

The result was that he was more than startled when the bight of a lasso dropped suddenly over his shoulders and he was hurled to the ground by a dexterous twitch that was given at the other end of the rope.

The noose pinioned his arms tightly to his sides, and though he was able to scramble around a little, he was not permitted to rise until a man had caught him by the collar and, raising him up held him at arm's-length while scrutinizing his face.

Fred was not inclined to surrender, and as the lasso dropped from his body when he was taken charge of by this second individual his hands were again free, and he at once began a desperate effort to escape. His heels went up, and then back, gathering momentum in the swing. Then his feet rose again, and he turned a flip-flop that wrenched him out of the hands of his captor. Only, as he landed full in the arms of the man with the lasso, who had hastily drawn nearer, there was little made by the exchange.

"Ah, the little monkey!" exclaimed the man from whose hand he had escaped.

"Hold him tightly, and look out for his claws. I have no doubt that he will scratch if he gets the chance. What do you suppose he is doing here?"

"It is another one of the party—the boy I told you of. He must have been with the man last night, and somehow escaped. That would account for the other horse. I don't see how we came to miss him; but he don't look as though he could do much damage, at the worst and now we have him, anyhow."

"But it speaks poorly for the vigilance you displayed. If the two were camped together, I cannot see how you were so grossly careless as to miss him. That will have to be investigated by and by. At present there is nothing to do but to take him along to the den. You will remain here on the watch, while I return and have an interview with the other prisoner. I will know better then what to do with them both. At one time in my life I would have known what to do without considering. As we grow older we grow either a great deal cooler or a great deal hotter."

The latter part of this was more in the shape of a soliloquy than a piece of information, and the speaker waited for no answer. From a niche in the side of the canyon he led out a horse, and taking the boy from the hands of his companion, he placed him in front, and started along the route that Fred had been pursuing.

After the failure of his one great effort, Limberleg remained discreetly quiescent. It is true that the way he was being treated hurt his feelings somewhat. They said not a word to him, and took it for granted that as he was only a boy he was to be treated with silent contempt. On the other hand, this gave him a chance to keep his smartness to himself, and left them to believe that it was only an ordinary boy they had captured, whose feelings were not worth the ventilation. He could consider the circumstances of his predicament at his leisure, and plan his course according to the developments as they came.

One thing he heard that gave him real pleasure. Amariah had not deserted him. Although he had not believed that Holdfast could be caught napping, there was certainly some allowance to be made for him. He had had his rest broken for several nights, and Fred knew by his own experience how sound a sleeper he might have been if he once allowed himself to glide through the gate of dreams.

Where they were going, and who these men were, was, of course, a mystery. He suspected more than ever that Amariah might have given him a valuable hint on those points if he had been so minded, and was inclined to be more than angry with the wonder-man that he had not enlightened him as to what this was all about. It would be an extra chance in his favor, just now, if he knew who this man was who kept such a steady, yet unconscious grip on his collar. At any rate he began to believe that he

was not in as much immediate danger as he had at first supposed, and felt that he could stand any scrutiny to which he might now be subjected with comparative coolness. He even began to wish that the man would talk a little. He wanted to learn something about the fate of Fanny, and would have had no objections to picking up a few points as to what had happened to Amariah.

But the man kept grimly silent, and Limberleg had wit enough to remain silent, also. Time would instruct him on these points; and he knew that he had a trick of irritating when he could do nothing more, and just now that was something that had better be omitted from the programme.

For half an hour the silent ride was kept up, until they began to emerge from the pass and catch glimpses of the desert plain that lay beyond. Remembering what Amariah had told him, Fred wondered how much longer this ride was to be kept up. It might be that their journey had only begun, though he hardly thought so after what had passed between his two captors.

But just as he was beginning to agitate his mind over this question the horseman turned sharply to one side, riding straight for what seemed to be an impenetrable wall of rocks. At the same time something came down over his eyes—it was the hat of the man behind him—and he heard a growl at his ear:

"Keep quiet, young monkey, or I will wring your neck."

In the first excitement of his capture, Fred was willing to take desperate chances to retain his freedom; but since he had had time to reflect a little, he was not certain that this was not the best thing that could have happened to him. He was also reasonably sure that if he did not obey the injunction the threat would be carried into effect. He did not move a muscle for the next five minutes.

Then the hat was removed from his eyes, and he was allowed a chance to view his surroundings.

"For a little beggar, you have nerve enough," said the man, as he restored his sombrero to his head. "Most youngsters would have trembled but you never gave a quiver. I'll see you again. Of course you cannot be allowed to leave here, but if you are the lad of sense that I suspect, there is no reason why you should not have a very comfortable time with the Old Man of the Mountains. Don't tell any lies, and it will be all the better for you."

As he finished speaking the man dropped him off into the arms of a fellow who approached at a signal.

"Keep an eye on him—better put him under cover, and see that he talks to no one. Otherwise, treat him well unless he tries to get away. If he does that he is of no consequence. Prevent it in the easiest way. I have no particular use for him."

Very coldly did the man speak, and then he rode away, leaving Limberleg to the tender mercies of his guide and jailer.

Of course the boy was listening to this, but at the same time he was looking around with curious glances, to see into what sort of a place he had penetrated.

To his surprise he found that he was in a little Park, the reverse of everything that had lately met his eyes. It was a bright, healthy-looking place, though hill-locked so completely that he could not guess at what point he had made his entrance. Of course he could not see clearly to the further end, since the level sward before him seemed to stretch away for nearly a mile; but there was no sign of any break in the natural wall that surrounded it. Here and there were scattered buildings of various sizes and dimensions, that looked as though the population of the place was a good deal larger than he would have believed if he had not seen them with his own eyes, and they seemed comfortable buildings, too, and built for more than passing accommodation.

Ward the nearest of these the guard led him, and without a word turned him into a bare, uncomfortable room, of perhaps a dozen feet square, which had the appearance of a guard-room. The walls and floor were of stone, and the opening that served as a window was high up and protected by a lattice-work of iron. When the door was banged shut behind him he realized that he was a prisoner more forcibly than he had yet done, or ever expected to. Coming along he had been flattering himself with hopes of escape for himself, and now the suggestion just now he was feeling was mind, and agreed with him that he could not possibly have had in his thoughts—with my man's trap. He must have followed too

which was about as near to a dungeon as he desired to get, Fred began to feel more than ever uncertain about his future fate. No one troubled his head about him, and the loneliness and silence were oppressive.

Supposing this was an unused, out-of-the-way building, and he was left there forgotten, he might starve to death! He tried the door, and found that it was locked from the other side. He listened, but he could hear no sound. His thoughts made him hungry, and he began to wish for the haversack, which had in some way dropped from his shoulder at the time of his capture. The day wore on, and at last darkness began to creep into the room. No meals for him that day—if he was only sure that there would be any for him the next. He seated himself dismally on the floor, with his head in his hands, and awaited whatever was to come.

When it was quite dark something did come—and in a way that was as alarming as unexpected. He heard a slight, grating noise; then one of the stone slabs that composed the floor dropped downward, almost from under him, and he was conscious that some one was trying to peer at him through the darkness.

CHAPTER X.V.

MORE LIGHT.

HIS captors had treated Fred with such utter contempt that they had not even searched his clothing for weapons. As a consequence he still had his revolver; and now he felt for it, found it, and silently drew it, his thumb on the hammer, ready to draw back for a shot the moment that he thought he could make it effective.

It was just as well that he waited. Even if he had missed hitting the intruder, the sound might have brought some one to the spot from the outside, and if he had planted a bullet in the person at the aperture he would have never forgiven himself when he found out who it was that was there. After a little he heard a voice, whisperingly murmuring his name.

The sound electrified him.

That was the last voice in the world that he expected to hear. It belonged to Fanny! Though there could be but little doubt in his mind, he was not willing to trust himself at once to speak. It might be a hallucination. Some one might be counterfeiting her tones in order to make him give away his position. He waited another instant.

"Are you there, little Limberleg? I was sure I saw you brought in here, and though I have watched ever since I have not seen you go out."

"Hallelujah!" exclaimed Fred, moderating his shout to suit the circumstances. "I have found you at last, have I? I was mighty much afraid that they had switched me off the trail for good. Where be yer? An' how did yer git here?"

"I guess it is I that found you. If I had not kept my eyes open and my wits very much about me you would have been in a very bad way. In a day or so I am afraid that you could not have found yourself. But how did you come to get here, and where is Amariah?"

"I come 'cause they brought me," answered Fred, ignoring the first part of her conversation; "an' Amariah can't now be far off of there's ary pendin' ter be put on that part ov ther conversation I happened ter overhear. Amariah were with me when I lay me down, an' when I woke he had disappeared. Ther chaps that took me later on sed they hed got a man w'ich war with me shortly previous, an' they wanted ter hev a talk at him afore they decided w'ot ter do with me. Then they brought me here a hossback. Ez that war w'ot I war amin' ter do—ter git here somehow, anyhow—I didn't squirm arter I seen how ther land lay. Bin a rooralizin' in this hole most ever sence, an' waitin' fur night ter throw her shaddo o'er ther scene afore I begun a lookin' fur you. No hurry at all, 'cause we couldn't do much tell it war dark. Now then, be we goin' ter skip ter onc't, or are we goin' ter see what we kin do fur Amariah? He 'pears ter be in a heap more danger than we be, an' sence I knowed what way ther land lay I kin consider him ez my pard. But afore that I jest war a breathin' fire an' slaughter. I thort he hed went back on me, an' gone on ter paddle his own canoe."

"You talk so much, Little Limberleg, that it always tires my head, while I am trying to think if it is all true. Are you sure that they have Amariah as a prisoner? That was not exactly as we intended. He was to take care of himself so as to be able to help me out if I needed its aid. And I thought he was too shrewd to be caught

After an hour or so he was nervous, for fear I would

be in danger, but ne did not need to be. Fan can take care of herself, every time."

"And perhaps, then, it war my fault, somewhat, after all. I druv him on a leetle faster than he seemed ter want ter go. Sorry ef I war too impashunt, but it'll be all right now. In course we don't give up ther ship tell we know w'ot's become ov ther captain. What a neat, warm leetle paw yer got. It does me good ter shake it. Lead me out, now, an' I'll spend all ter-morrer moonin' over it; but ter-night belongs ter ther bizziness that's spelled with a big B."

In the darkness Fanny had slipped her hand into his, but it was not at all for the sake of any mooning, as Fred called it.

"Keep quiet, now," she answered, speaking a little lower. "Let my hand guide you. There is a steep stairway to descend; and the slab through which I found my way to you had better be returned to its place. Then, if they should come looking for you they will not know how you have managed to disappear. I will take you to the room where I have been confined, and we can lay our plans as we go along."

"Guess this ain't a case that needs much plannin'," retorted Fred, as he yielded to the impulse of her hand. "Ef we kin find Amariah we want ter do it, an' then make tracks with ther heels all this way. I judge these be despit cases, an' don't mean no good ter none ov us. Wouldn't be surprised ef Amariah war dead afore this, even."

"I think not. They will not harm him until they are certain about me. And I am afraid that they did not g-t much satisfaction when they interviewed me. I knew as little as even a girl of my opportunities could know—just enough to make them want to hear more. But all the same I have not seen yet the man that I wanted to see; and if there is any mistake about him, Amariah may be in a worse fix than he counted on, even when he figured up that he might be captured."

"Strikes me ye'r lettin', er tyryin' ter let me, inter ther inside ov Amariah's game. I might remind yer, though, that all thet stuff's Latin an' Greek ter me—an' ther roodiments ov w'ich same Lain't yi acquainted with."

"So he told you nothing. All the better for you, then; and I won't overwhelm you with my confidences. Now, be quiet. We are getting near to the room from which I escaped. I want to see if I have been missed. Then, we will go on, and look for some traces of Amariah. We did not provide for such a wholesale capture, and perhaps, even if I could get away, our plans would have to be reorganized. I am not as anxious to escape as I was before I met you."

"Well, I be — ef you are along with me. Wouldn't stay here another day ter meet ther Emp'rer ov Chiny. It's only dooty ter Azariahr ez could keep me now. D'ye hear anything?"

His whisper scarcely reached the girl, who had left him standing in the darkness, while she ran up a stone stairway which corresponded with the one under the cell lately occupied by Fred. She was back again in a moment.

"There is no one there now, and I doubt if there has been any one during my absence. I had a light when I found the way to your prison-room, but blew it out because I had to be saving, and knew the way well enough this far. There is another passage that I intended to explore after I had seen whether the one I took led to you. We will try it now. It may lead to father Holdfast."

She struck a match as she spoke, and lit a little taper, one of half a dozen she had on her when taken. It made but a glimmer of light but it was by all odds better than none at all. They could see the walls of the passage through which they had been making their way and found the opening that Fan hoped might lead them to Amariah.

They found no difference between this passage and the other one, and followed it for about the same distance, until they came to the stone stairway they expected to find. Very cautiously they ascended this, and discovered that at the top was the same kind of a stone door as that Fan had found to the other cell. She pointed out to him the lever by which it was opened and shut, and then extinguished the light.

"We must be very careful now, Freddy. I am going to try to open that door, and if we are in the wrong box a box it will be indeed. I hope to find Amariah; but it may be that we will only find the men that have taken him. If they once suspected that we were here they could soon have us back in worse plight than when we started."

They listened, and could hear no sounds from the room they were sure was above them, but

that was no sign that there was no conversation going on there. The slabs on the floor fitted closely, and sound would not travel very readily there. The room might have a dozen occupants for all they could hear or know.

One thing was in their favor. Judging from their experience with the stone in Fred's room, the slab would move noiselessly, and it would be possible to open it sufficiently far to hear if there was any one moving or speaking above, without much danger of being observed.

"Not a word now," said Fan, softly. "I am going to open the door a little. We can tell then if there is a light, and after that must wait until we are certain that there will be no mistakes. It would not be fine to rout out some one else instead of Amariah. The king of this camp might be sleeping there himself, for all I know. It is only a guess that Amariah is confined above. Be silent now. Ready."

Womanlike, Fanny arranged so that she had the last word. As soon as she ceased speaking, she applied her hands to the lever, and slowly the slab over their heads rose up a short distance. Then the two crouched and listened.

Their caution was not thrown away. They heard voices in the room, and recognized one as belonging to Holdfast, while Fred was certain that the other belonged to the man who had brought him there in front of him on horseback, and who seemed to be the ruler of this strangely found principality.

A little thread of light stole through the crevice, and from the tenor of the few words they heard it was evident that the conversation had but just begun. With breathless earnestness they listened, anxious to know how it was likely to be with Amariah, and curious to get a further insight into the mystery.

CHAPTER XV.

A REMARKABLE STORY.

"I BELIEVE that I cannot be mistaken," were the first words heard by the listeners. "You are the man once known as Simon Sanford."

The voice belonged to Holdfast, but the words were not his at all. Here was the first step toward the solution of the mystery. The answer was waited for with some impatience.

"It makes little difference to either you or me whether I assent or deny. Why should I do either? But you are the cowardly scoundrel who answers to the name of Cyrus Dawling when you are not so afraid for your life as to deny your own identity. When we two meet, there can be but one result. Both of us can hardly go away from the spot alive."

"My name is not Cyrus Dawling. If it was, I hope that I have sand enough not to deny it, whatever might be the danger to myself and others. I will admit that I am a pretty good imitation; but now that the disguise has accomplished its work, there is no more need for it, and it will be dropped as soon as possible."

"And, pray, what may it have been assumed for?" was the sneering response of the other. "A man would think twice before he would try to pass himself off for such a pack of villainous cowardice."

"It was to meet you. There was no other way to find you; and you must admit that you snatched at the bait quickly enough."

"Not at you, please remember. You could have wandered through the whole length and breadth of the mining-camps in welcome. It was to find the girl whom I knew to be with you. You ought to know the whole story. I will give you just one more chance to tell the truth. If you are not Cyrus Dawling—otherwise known as Amariah Holdfast—who are you?"

"I am sometimes known as Hank Darby, and sometimes spoken of as Happy Hank, the Lightning Detective from Gideon's Bar. As no one else would risk the finding of you I have undertaken the contract, and you can see for yourself that I have been a little more than successful."

Fred heard the words quite as plainly as the man who had been addressed as Simon Sanford. At the singular assertion he gave a start and looked around as though he could see Fanny in the darkness. Was there any truth in this?

He would have given a dollar or two if he could have seen Sanford's face at the announcement; as the next best thing he listened anxiously for the tones of his voice when next he spoke. After what he had seen and heard he had little doubt that the presence of a detective there would be a little more than unpleasant to the king-pin of the retreat.

Nor was he mistaken. There was something like concentrated murder in the way Sanford answered.

"Ah, you own to that much, do you? Why, you must be bound to seal your death-warrant. Cyrus Dawling I would give a chance for his life, hound though he be; but the detective who had followed me here, to the last place of refuge from the persecutions and outrages of the world, I would kill without mercy. Think twice before you persist in the lie. You shall have your chance as Dawling, or your doom as Darby. Which do you prefer?"

"I reckon yew will have to give me my chance ez Darby; an' when I git through with my story mebbe you'll be willin' tew let Cyrus slide out ov sight, even ef you don't keer tew take his hand. I'll admit it war not ther object tew work ther rifle in exactly this way; but ez yew seem not tew hev seen the gal at all I kin tell ther story fu'stan' yew kin interview her afterwards. Air yew goin' tew lissen?"

"Can you not understand why I did not care to speak to her until I had settled with you? From what my agents told me I knew that she had never fathomed the depths of your wickedness, and would be apt to ask that you be spared when she knew all the cause I had for hate. When you were under six feet of turf there would be no reason why I should not promise her to leave you forever alone. You understand that I intend to kill you."

Sanford did not appear to notice that the man before him had reassumed the dialect that had for the time been dropped. Other things were so weighing on his mind that the freak of his prisoner did not seem worth the notice.

"An' so deestroy yewr last chance ov ever comin' out inter ther world ag'in tew enjoy ther wealth an' fambly ez yew might otherwise be getherin' round yew. Sime Sanford, yew ain't a leetle angel-fur w'ich, considerin' sarkumstances, I don't altergether blame ye—but I don't think yer a blamed fool, square an' solid. Air yew goin' tew hear me?"

"I expect to hear a good deal before I get through with you. I intend to have an open confession, if I have to tear it out of you with red hot irons. You can tell me what lies you choose, if you don't take too long with them; and then I will get at the truth in my own gentle way."

"First, an' for'most; kin yew tell me whar is yewr darter?"

"Ha, ha! Where should she be? You followed closely enough to know that she was brought straight to my hands, when she left yours. You thought me dead, did you? Surely, you would never have risked your worthless neck within reaching distance of my fingers if you had not."

"It was beca'se I knew that yew war livin' that I run ther risks. Yewr darter is a-livin'; but she ain't in yewr hands—not by a long sight. Yew got the bait I put tew my trap, but she ain't Simon Sanford's darter ary more than I be Cyrus Dawling. That's treuth number one that I want yew tew remember."

"Liar!" gritted Sanford. "I do not understand at what you are driving, but I know that you are lying, all the same. What other girl would Cyrus Dawling burden himself with? And the description was too accurate—everyting too certain. When I heard, I knew that my daughter was once more mine, and that my enemy had delivered himself into my hands."

"All the same, until he knew that you were dead, and was reasonably well sure that there was no danger of his being taken for murder, Cyrus Dawling would never have run the risks that I have done, or had wisdom enough to devise this plan to put himself face to face with a man whom he fears, or feared, more than anything else on earth. Where he is, and where your daughter is, you will not be likely to ever know if you throw overboard the chance that I am trying to give you. Perhaps, if you had looked for the scar that used to be on your daughter's neck, you might have been willing to believe how you were fooled. If you can find it, I am willing to acknowledge—truth or no truth—that I am the man you believed I was, and a liar from 'wayback."

"There is something in what you say," answered the other, slowly. "Even for the wealth that could be hers Cyrus would not have put himself within my reach, and if he had been the one to fall into my hands, he would not have had the courage to have temporized as you have done. He would have died of fright. Let me look at your face again. If it is not the genuine in disguise, it is an imitation such as I never could have expected to see. And if this is the truth that you have been telling; if you have been trifling with my holie affections to serve your own prof—

think you that you will be any the better off than Cyrus Dawling would have been if he had fallen into my hands?

"But no; I cannot believe it, even if my eyes told me that your words were the solemn truth. I have had you carefully shadowed too long. This is no disguise assumed on the spur of the moment, to suit a detective's aims. It is one thing that you have worn for years. I can trace you from the time when you dropped the garb of Dawling and became Holdfast. I was a fool to believe you, and yet for a moment you almost had me convinced."

"And will have you altogether convinced before I am done with you. You may know when Cyrus took up the character of Holdfast; but you cannot tell, it seems, when he handed it over to me. I want to convince you beyond a reasonable doubt, because when I have done that, I have something still harder to accomplish. I want to make you understand that your life for years has been a blunder, and that Cyrus Dawling never wronged you. That is my mission here. Because I could reach you in no other guise, I ran the risks and came to you in this."

There was a silence that seemed a great deal longer than it really was, followed by the click of a revolver as the hammer was being forced back. The listeners could guess the danger that Holdfast was in, and yet they dared not move. Any interference of theirs must come too late, and would only provoke the catastrophe that was on the verge of happening.

If they could only have seen, they would have discovered that the detective never winced, or even looked as though he was in danger, though the muzzle of Simon Sanford's revolver was at his forehead, and his eyes glared like those of a maniac.

"Do you take me for a fool? You have trifled once too often with your life, and the end may as well come now as a little later on. Your object is too plain to deceive an idiot—such as no doubt you conceive me to be. If you are not Dawling, then your object is either to stay here, or to inveigle me where the rcpe will be at work as well. Granted that you are H—d—by. You will never put handcuffs on a strong man, or hand him over to the gallows. Pray your prayers, if you know any. The time has come for you to die."

"Then you will hang, sure!" retorted the other, having calmly listened to this outburst. "Wouldn't it be just as well for you to consider that I am not exactly an idiot myself, and that I would not have put myself in such a corner without leaving word behind as to where my remains might be looked for? The fun will begin in earnest. To save yourself from an imaginary evil, from which you have been fleeing for so many years, you will throw yourself into a real danger, from which there will be no escape. No one but my partners and I know that you are living—if you except Cyrus Dawling, himself, who, in a certain sense, is a partner, since we are working this thing together. Your wife believes that you are living, but is not sure. She is hunting for you now, in the interests—"

Thus far, and then the detective suddenly ceased speaking, and gazed keenly at Sanford, who had thrown up his hands, dropping the revolver from his grasp as he did so, and staggered back, exclaiming in a husky whisper:

"My wife! Heavens! What are you telling me?"

"The truth. If you had been listening at this time that I have been trying to beat it into you, you would not be so staggered now. Of course you thought that you killed your wife; and all the world thought that Cyrus Dawling had killed you. I am not so sure that he ought to have done so; but, as everybody that the mix is still living; and there is a heap of money, that belongs somewhere, at st—. I think it is about time to have the mystery cleared up. I can tell you one thing: There are some other hounds on the scent of that fortune, who will not be at all squeamish in the means they take to get it; and if Mr. Sanford stands in the way they will be perfectly willing to remove her. She was at Hayden fe—. It— to possession when he pr—. The hei— now, if the guardian, proves he—. What are you—. At any rate—

sked Sanford, in a self-possess—

"are they there together, Cyrus Dawling and the woman who was my wife?"

"Scarcely."

"Then what is she to him? what has she been, since she has thought I was dead?"

"Only his sister. Even such a vagabond as Dawling is liable to have relations; and being ashamed of him don't seem to mend matters. It would have saved a heap of trouble if she had felt the other way."

"What an infernal fool I have been!"

"I'm not so sure of that. There is time enough yet to get a heap of good out of life; and if you haven't struck a bonanza in here, and laid away enough of the ore to pay the national debt, I'm away off."

"Yes, I have found what most men would give their souls for. I would have given it all at any time for the peace of mind that your intelligence will give me, if these things that you tell me are true. But I confess that I do not understand this masquerade."

"Simplest thing in the world. We have been looking for you, and figured it down that you were here or hereabouts; but we never could find you. Dawling, who was afraid to risk meeting you, put himself in my hands. His sister and he hung together when he was wanted for your killing; and of course they were both in disguise. You sent some one to look after Cyrus, and dropped to him and your daughter, but for some reason missed the woman in the case. After the one effort you made to get the girl, I knew that I had you. The intention was to let Fan be taken and tell you the story, while I would be in supporting distance, to corroborate. Nestor Northrup got on the trail of us, but he was foiled, too, though he gave us some trouble with his Lambs. When I go back I will dispose of him in short order, if you want one of the family brought into the reach of the law. If you don't he will hardly stand on the ceremony of his going when you come on the carpet."

"And my daughter—where is she now?"

"Safe in the care of one of the best men in Hard Pan. You have nothing to fear for her. He does not know all the danger she is in, but the villains cannot reach her even if they locate her. I have a good man on the watch. And they think that my Fan is their game. Oh, I tell you, it is time that you turned up. The Haydens have a man down there looking after you—or rather, after proofs of your death. He wormed your wife's story out of her, and for a time believed her. Then, when he got track of Dawling, he thought she had been making it out of the whole cloth, and set her down as a fraud. Now, then, if you have any doubts, you can have a talk with my little girl; and after that, the sooner we get back to Hard Pan, the sooner will all the complications that have been ruining half a dozen lives be cleared up, and your wife have a chance to forgive you—though I am but half convinced that she will."

"And the boy that I captured, following the trail after you had been spirited away? Who is he? He is here; and I am glad that he was not treated roughly."

"The boy is abundantly able to speak for himself."

"You bet he is!" interrupted Fred, as the door in the floor opened, and he sprung into the room, followed by Fanny. "W'y, I'm a-working fur Mrs. Sanford, an' I've figgered it all out 'thout it's costin' me a cent. Ef she hed jest menshuned suthin' 'bout Amariah an' ther gal, et would 'a' saved a heap ov figgerin', but she only set me ter inquirin' fur Simon when I gotter Hard Pan—an' here I've found him an' all ther rest. Hold on, though! She did post me a leetle 'bout Northrup, w'ich ther same I hed seen afore; an' ther war a time I thort mebbe Amariah an' him war in ther same boat. Here's Fan, an' a trump she be! What's ther matter with startin' fer Hard Pan ter-night?"

The appearance of the youngsters was a surprise to Sanford, but he was more amused than angered by it. He had at last given his confidence to the detective, and needed no corroboration of theirs to convince him that it was the truth he had been hearing. He was more anxious to hear the particulars that Darby could tell him, and learn how his wife had recovered from what he had been sure was a fatal wound; how her black sheep of a brother came to bear the name of Dawling; and a score of other things that were suggesting themselves to add to his torturing curiosity.

Yet the road to Hard Pan was long, and there would be plenty of time to talk over these things as they went along. The suggestion of Fred was exactly to his mind, and agreed with what the wonder-man had in his thoughts—with a proviso.

"The boy has the right end o' the string. I don't want to get my eye off of those villains at the other end too long. I guess Fan could stand the trip—she seems made of whip-leather—but we all want a little rest first, and something like a square meal. I don't know how your larder is supplied, but from the way I feel, I think it will be pretty well exhausted by the time I have had the chance to go through it. I haven't had anything to eat since last night, and I didn't eat very hearty then."

"Good for you, Amariah! Even a boy ov mod'rare bigness kin put away a heap ov grub when he's holler to his boots. Tell 'em ter lay out fur sev'ral dozen. I kin eat fur fourteen!"

"I suppose I should apologize to you two. The young lady has fared better, of course. I thought a little fasting and prayer would bring you into a better frame of mind to tell the truth. We will make amende for that now. After that I will take you at your word, Mr. Darby, and together we will seek my wife and daughter."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FINAL TRANSFORMATION.

EBENEZER CROWFUT had not been having altogether a comfortable time for the last few days. Scarcely did he know why, but the idea was beginning to dawn upon him that his trust was one of some importance and possible danger. Jarvis Jackson troubled him, and his wife had a good deal to say.

The afternoon of the second day Nestor Northrup appeared on the scene, inquiring what had become of Mrs. Simon Sanford, and if he knew what had become of her daughter.

Without intending it, Jarvis Jackson had put Northrup up to this dodge, which was only a forlorn sort of hope. Jackson had been making some inquiries of Nestor, without any idea that he had an interest in the Sanfords, and in the conversation let drop something about an adventuress, who had some scheme in connection with the case, who claimed to be the widow of the dead or missing man, and whom he last saw in the office of Ebenezer Crowfut.

That hint was sufficient for Northrup. He had his own ideas about her being an adventuress, and thought it very likely that she might have had something to do with the disappearance of her daughter. As he found no trace of her anywhere else he went to Crowfut.

Of course he learned nothing from what Ebenezer said; but with as sharp eyes and understanding as Northrup had, the visit was not by any means thrown away. He did not see the lady—had not even hint that such a lady had an existence—but he saw Laura Lane.

He went away puzzled, but very certain that he was on the right trail now. How she could have got into Crowfut's house without his knowing it was more than he could understand; but there she was, or he did not know a Sanford when he saw her.

"There is one thing on which it will be very safe for Mr. Crowfut to gamble. She will not be there to-morrow morning," was his reflection, as he wended his way toward the Gem. "There ought to be enough of the boys within reach to make things very lively in case Mr. Crowfut thinks it worth his while to resist the constituted authorities—as they are or ought to be. I fancy it would be best to spirit the young damsel away without any remarks as to my intentions. There is an unhealthy feeling in the air, and if I can leave the town behind me without giving any of its citizens an idea of which way, or why, I went, it will be vastly better. Yes. The best we can do is to take her quietly out of Crowfut's keeping. If we can find her on the street, so much the better. If not—his house is not exactly a castle, and I think there will be no trouble in sacking it to-night. The only trouble will be to hold in the boys. It won't do to take any other plunder. Some day or other it would come to light that the man that got the Sanford fortune must have been in with the Lambs, and it would be like my luck for Ebenezer to come to get even. He has the reputation of being an obstinate man if there is one."

Of course Ebenezer had no idea of what was in the wind; but he was careful for all that; and his charge was not allowed on the street after nightfall, while his house, in spite of Nestor Northrup, was something like a castle, in its strength, if not in its size. When he built it, near to the edge of the town, he made up his mind that he would not have it captured by surprise, as his residence at Humbug Bar had been, the time that the outlaws invaded that town,

and stripped it of about all its portable wealth. The building was of stone, with loopholes through which he could command the approaches; and the roof was fireproof, and pretty near to being ax-proof. There was a backing of oak to the doors; and there were substantial window-shutters that could be closed in a moment, from the inside. Nestor Northrup had only glanced at the house and taken in the surface of things, which did not make much show. If he had known how everything really was, he might not have felt so confident that he would be able to abduct the heiress, even from under Ebenezer Crowfut's roof-tree.

The evening passed on, and having closed the store, Mr. Crowfut wended his way homeward. He was unconscious of the fact that he was followed by several men, who moved as silently as shadows, and who drew near when he halted at his own doorway.

Ebenezer tried the door, and found, as he expected, that it was locked. As he carried a key, he was not at all inconvenienced, but proceeded to unlock the door.

The key turned leisurely, the bolt shot back—and then the worthy merchant felt himself seized by powerful hands, which wrenches him from his feet and flung him heavily to the ground. After that he only knew that there was a grip on his throat, which tightened until his consciousness fled.

The assailants made complete work as they went along, since they took no chances, but bound the insensible man hand and foot. Then they boldly tried the door, and finding that it yielded, two of them entered the house, while the third remained 'on guard outside. It was too early to expect to find the other inmates of the house in bed. Mrs. Crowfut and Laura were sitting in the living room, having a little confidential talk as the men burst in. As they came unbidden, and wore masks on their faces, it was patent at a glance that they were there for no honest purpose; and yet there was neither scream or outcry from the two, as they rose from their seats.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" asked the elder lady, as she boldly faced the fellow who had a leveled revolver pointed in her direction.

"Jest keep yer mouth shut, an' yer hand still, an' thar won't be no harm done ter you, marm. But ef yer tries ary skullduggery, we're prepared ter lay out yer corpus in less than half a second. An' you, young lady—don't open that mouth ov your tell yer gits further orders. It's lucky fur you thet you hev yer duds all on. We ain't got much time ter wait, an' we want you real bad. Ef you please, hold up yer hands, an' make ready ter come along with us. It's fur yer own good an' comfort."

As he spoke, the fellow advanced and laid a hand heavily on the shoulder of Laura, while his companion stealthily moved around, edging toward Mrs. Crowfut, ready to make a grab as soon as he got within reaching distance. It looked as if the two females were at the mercy of the bold intruders.

But just then there was a sudden change in the aspect of affairs. There was a sound of voices without, though no one could catch the words that were spoken; then Amariah Holdfast sprung into the room dragging Nestor Northrup by the throat, and followed by his duplicate and half a dozen others, including Simon Sanford, Fanny, Little Limberleg and Dandy.

The bear was as grave as ever—and just as obedient to a motion of his duplicate masters. At a turn of the hand and a glance of an eye that would not have been seen by the average human, the brute launched himself upon the man whose fingers touched Laura's shoulders, and bore him heavily to the ground.

"Ef yew please," said the Amariah who originally appeared upon the scene of action at Hard Pan; "this air a fambly party, an' we don't keert hev outsiders tew introod. Dandy, yew hev Captain Thompson, ov the Lambs. Is there ary one here connect d with ther law which kin as soome ther responsibility ov keerin' fur him? Ef not, ez his presence air not desirable, Dandy will hev tew pe ced tew eat him."

A grave-faced man stepped forward and clapped a pair of handcuffs on Thompson's wrists, while another grave-faced man did the same for the other outlaw. Then these two prisoners were carried away, I avin' Nestor Northrup as much puzzled as frightened, and wondering what it all meant and what was to be his fate. He had not as yet recognized Simon Sanford.

Then Amariah came to the front, looking hard at Mrs. Crowfut and the young girl.

"Laura, this is your father. The object of the masquerade has been attained, and if you

can tell us where we will find your mother, it will not be long before the family circle is complete, and henceforth to exist without any misunderstandings."

"Are you sure the time has come? There must be no mistakes. I desire to meet my father with the respect of a daughter—and perhaps in time with a daughter's love—but I don't want to lose a mother. She is not far away, and I can bring her soon, but I want to know that it is for her happiness as well as mine."

"Bring her, child, bring her quickly!" exclaimed Sanford, for the first time opening his lips. "There is much to be forgiven on both sides, if you will only believe me—and the sooner it is done the sooner we can begin life anew, with at least a prospect for all the happiness that money can buy, and love bring. If I have wronged her it was because I loved her; and in the bonanza, of which her agent knows the truth, well as I have kept it hidden until now from all the world save my men, there is a fortune far beyond the wildest dreams that we dreamed in the olden time."

"It's skassly wo'th while ter send fur her," chimed in Fairy Fred, slipping into the circle until he met Sanford, and bent upon him the full light of his twinkling eyes. "She is here now, if you could only pick her out. When every one else was working did you think that she would be idle? She was as far to the front as any one, and has done her humble share toward bringing this family conclave together. If Little Limberleg is no more, Laura Sanford can take his place; and her husband will know that there is little more to tell of her, since she has learned his inner secrets and knows all the truth already!"

And at the revelation, and the unmasking that revealed the woman as she was, there was not one there who at first could believe the evidences of his or her own senses.

"Oh, yon need not stare," she continued, looking at Darby with a smile. "Did you think I could altogether trust any man until I knew something more about him than I did about you? Your scheme to find Mr. Sanford was a good one, and I wondered that I had never had the nerve to undertake it before. It was so good that I determined to see how it worked, so that I could judge for myself what the chances were for a reconciliation. [I placed our daughter where I knew that she would be safe, and then threw myself in your way. I was not altogether certain about this false Laura—Fanny. It was possible the character of Simon Sanford's daughter might be assumed only too well, and that when he was found my own daughter might be left in the lurch. Pardon me for these suspicions, but they were only natural. As the sister and companion of Cyrus Dawling, I had long ago learned enough to make the assumption of the character of Little Limberleg an easy thing. And as for you, Simon, if you have got a little over your wonder, there is no need to tell you that I believe all is now understood between us, and that there is no necessity to hamper the occasion by reopening what we cannot help but consider old wounds. The time will yet come when we can laugh at their scars, but at present with but little provocation they might bleed afresh. Am I not right?"

"As always, my dear," said Sanford, coming forward to take her hand. "I am afraid I would laugh at myself if I undertook to embrace a boy like Fairy Fred, but, when you are rehabilitated as to garb, and it is not your face alone tells me that you are my long-lost wife, I can tell you better that my affection has never wavered, and that this is really the happiest moment of my life."

It seemed a little strange to his guilty associates that Nestor Northup, whose connection with the Lambs could have been proved beyond peradventure, should have been allowed to escape; but the fact was that, for the sake of the family which had been so lately united, it was not down on Hank Darby's cards that he should be brought to justice just then. Sanford was not wildly revengeful, and there was time enough for him to run a little longer race with the hangman, and have the ending where he would not be called upon to testify.

Without Nestor the list of the outlaws was long enough; and no one was more surprised than Thompson to learn how complete it was. Darby's arrangements had been much more thorough than any of the outsiders had any notion of until the whole matter was disposed of.

Of the Lambs who had attempted the abduction of the girl, there was not one left free-footed. The fictitious Hank Darby and his followers had been allowed to retreat far enough from the Hive

to permit of its being done without attracting attention; then they were all arrested by the men who had been waiting for them. Instead of retiring to the fold of the "Lambs," as Northrup and the captain had supposed, they were on their way over the mountains under a strong guard, and were not heard of again until they came into court to receive their just deserts.

The secret bonanza of Simon Sanford, which he had discovered in his wanderings when he was seeking to escape as much from himself as from justice, remained a secret for some time longer. He had a little kingdom there in which his subjects were magnificently well paid for their labors, and in which his wife queened it right royally, and his daughter enacted the role of princess to the satisfaction of all concerned.

The true Cyrus Dawling did not give over his wanderings, though henceforth he and Dandy had no companions. When he felt that the rope was no longer noosed ready for his neck, and that his brother-in-law had only a good-natured contempt for the man he had once thought to murder, he recovered more than his old-time courage: but, practically, he will be as worthless as ever to the end of time. He is the true wonder-man, and could make his imitator stare; but he never will, in all his life, put his abilities to half the real use that Darby did their imitation, in the little time that he, with the assistance of his daughter, played the part in and around the town of Hard Pan.

THE END.

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